

APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

Author: Fehu Kazuno

illust: Jun

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Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra: World Conquest Starts with the Civilization of Ruin, Volume 2

Fehu Kazuno

Translation by Charis Messier

Illustration by Jun

Title Design by A.M. Perrone

Editing by A.M. Perrone

Proofreading by Yvonne Yeung

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Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra: World Conquest Starts with the Civilization of Ruin, Volume 2

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Prologue

AFTER dying and waking up in another world, Takuto Ira realized he'd become the commander of a civilization from the strategy game *Eternal Nations*. He took charge of the evil forces of Mynoghra and was served by Atou, the strongest-end-game and weakest-early-game Hero unit. He'd begun managing his empire with the sole goal of living peacefully with the girl who also remembered playing the game with him.

Adding the Dark Elves to their ranks along the way, Mynoghra's growth had been proceeding as they'd hoped, but fate prefers chaos to order.

The Holy Kingdom of Qualia had to go and dispatch its Paladins to scout Mynoghra's territory. From that encounter, they learned of the existence of Witches and Saints.

Takuto thought back on those chaotic days so full of trigger flags that it seemed as if he'd been roped into the storyline of a video game.

"Haa..." he sighed. "So much has happened, huh? Why does trouble keep showing up at our door when we only want to be left in peace...?"

"A lot of events cued at once, didn't they...?"

Takuto's lament was met with a response from Atou, the Hero unit he trusted and adored the most.

Right before his eyes was the empire he'd built from the ground up, and Atou stood at his side. In the game, the scenery was a little dull and lackluster because it was just expressed with computer graphics, but when he looked at what he had now, the realness of its presence moved him in ways a game never could.

He let out another sigh, signaling the end of the first phase of their journey, and sat on his favorite throne. Then he suddenly realized that Atou was leaning forward, gazing into his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing!” she squeaked. “I think it was all just in my head, after all!”

“Really? I get that! I often get stuck in my own head too.”

“Right?!”

I wonder what’s gotten into her.

Takuto was starting to worry because Atou had been acting funny lately, giving him scared looks and all, but interacting with her now made it seem like he had been worried for nothing.

Atou was also relieved to discover her doubts were unfounded.

After encountering and battling the Holy Kingdom of Qualia’s recon team, Takuto’s words had pierced her heart like a thorn.

Although he’d grown up in an unusual environment, being bedridden in a hospital most of his life, the Takuto Atou knew should’ve been an ordinary person living in a peaceful world with normal sensibilities. Yet, he was okay with Atou killing people and even asked her why he should be bothered by it.

At that moment, Takuto appeared distorted to her, and she was overwhelmed with apprehension and doubt about whether he was indeed the boy she knew. But she must’ve just been imagining things because she didn’t sense the same thing from him now.

She was probably just rattled by nerves from her first battle—nerves she never knew she had.

Determining that was the case, Atou shoved the thought aside and never paid it attention again.

Thus, the two of them continued to run Mynoghra the same way as before, without noticing each other’s discomfort—all to create the peaceful and tranquil evil civilization they dreamed of.

Things had been set in motion throughout the world.

The forces of good, neutral forces, and the forces of evil.

In a world blending various emotions to resemble a game, yet completely

different from any game, Mynoghra took its next turn...

Chapter 1: Twins

MYNOGHRA had crushed the Holy Kingdom of Qualia's reconnaissance team, buying them a little more time to live in peace and quiet. They were steadily amassing more power, the extra time working in their favor as Takuto had speculated.

Today again, Mynoghra completed the construction of another facility to solidify its position in the world.

"It's finally built!"

"Yes!! The Palace is complete!"

Takuto and Atou looked on with satisfaction at the newly established national symbol. Although it had the grand title of Palace, it was actually the lowest level building in its class and wasn't even that big.

At best, it was on par with the mansion of a middle-ranking nobleman. But wastefully expanding its size at this point in the game would only bury them under higher Upkeep costs. They'd likely need to upgrade it once their empire grew, but this was more than enough for where they were at now, and it satisfied Takuto, who never even had a room to call his own during his past life.

Faint light shined in through the skylight, illuminating the familiar throne that had been decorated more lavishly than before to give off a regal presence. Takuto sat on the throne that now had a certain mystique and reclined without hiding his giddy laughter. His good mood skyrocketed when Atou whistled like she always did when he took to his throne.

As much as he enjoyed taking in the splendor of his Palace and the comforts of his throne, he'd be dubbed incompetent if he let that distract him from his work. Takuto was King, and it was his duty to manage the empire, leading it in the direction of peace and tranquility.

Mynoghra is an evil empire that loves peace.

Takuto's initial objective hadn't changed, regardless of how others perceived his empire or the actions he'd taken.

"Okay, Military Magic is already in the testing phase, so I'd say we've got the foundation more or less laid out, wouldn't you?"

In *Eternal Nations*, the 4x strategy game Takuto played during his past life, there was a Magic Technology called Military Magic.

Military Magic allows each civilization to use powerful spells based on the Mana unique to their alignment. Normally, the player seeks out a Resource point called a Dragon Vein Mine, which supplies the necessary Mana, but a Palace can also automatically generate it to alleviate the load.

Mynoghra's Palace produces Ruin Mana. It can also generate some Magic Power too.

While it might be seen as a complete waste of resources if you only view it as a status symbol, taking the benefits it brings to the empire just by existing into consideration makes constructing the Palace an obvious decision. Especially in this Resource barren starter land Mynoghra spawned in.

They had already gotten off to a great start, especially considering how Mynoghra's early-game weaknesses often cause the empire to bottleneck. Not only had they been blessed by the unexpected good fortune of the Dark Elves joining their empire early on, but Mynoghra's presence had yet to be exposed despite all the trouble with the Paladins.

Takuto couldn't let his guard down, but he'd brought the empire far enough along to take a moment to breathe at least.

"That's true, but we're going to need more citizens to expand. How in the world do we increase their numbers...?" Atou asked.

"It'll take way too long if we wait for their numbers to grow naturally," Takuto agreed.

The pile of problems ahead still towered over Takuto and Atou.

The problem they had to tackle next was their lack of citizens.

Normally, population growth can be expected over a long period of time, but

considering the current continental situation, Mynoghra was falling behind the other empires.

Of course, Takuto was still planning to secure their labor force using the Larva produced by Isla, Queen of Bugs and Mynoghra's unique race, the Homunculus, as an option, but what they currently needed the most were units to serve in intellectual capacities. In other words, they required citizens with the intelligence to think for themselves and invent new things independently.

"I heard the Dark Elves have other clansmen who are still wandering in search of a new home," Atou mentioned. "We could secure a decent workforce if we welcome them into our empire, but that still wouldn't be enough."

"So, the question is: what's the best solution?"

Takuto and Atou racked their brains in the newly completed Palace.

Lately, Elder Moltar, Gia, and Emle had been so busy with their various jobs, they couldn't stop by as often to talk anymore. The reason was simply that there weren't enough educated personnel to handle all the intellectual work. This also served as evidence that building a solid framework was necessary to run a working empire.

The greater the world you see around you, the more apparent what you lack becomes.

That being said, there was only so much they could do at this point.

Steadily solving what they could was the best strategy, which meant the population problem was shelved for another day.

"But it is impressive," Atou said, sweeping her gaze over the Palace to change the dead-end topic. "Our world will start from here."

The Palace wasn't that big because it was a base-level facility, but it was still imposing and breathtaking. Wood unique to Mynoghra was woven in layers in a distinctly Dark Elf architectural style, making the structure look like a work of art. Of course, the decorative details were just as stunning.

The textiles woven by the Dark Elf women were the definition of perfection. Just looking at the history of Mynoghra embroidered on them almost gave the

illusion they were telling a mythical tale.

The Palace, though still at its starter level, was sufficient for the King to reside in. The final stage after the last upgrade was even grander.

“Yeah, you can say that again. Let’s upgrade it once we have the extra Resources. I love the biggest Palace!” Takuto exclaimed in high spirits.

It’s often said that every man wants to be lord of his own castle, so it made sense why Takuto was acting like an excited child whose mom just bought him a brand new toy. And it’s no wonder Atou became just as excited seeing how enthusiastic it made her king.

“I couldn’t agree with you more, my king! Our Palace shall take root in the ground and pierce the heavens! Our vassals will be powerful heroes with dauntless courage! Our walls will be filled with countless, beautiful maids!”

“Yeah!! Now we’re talking! It makes me forget all the bad stuff.”

Takuto threw open his arms with a “Woohoo!” He was in such a good mood, he could dance.

Atou mimicked the gesture, spreading her arms and sharing in her king’s joy. But then she let out a scream, pouring cold water on the merrymaking.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!”

“UWAAAAH?!”

She’d screamed so loud, Takuto had jumped and slid off his throne.

What in the world had gotten into her?

Taking slow breaths to calm his racing heart, Takuto looked up at his trembling confidant.

“I-I just realized something dreadful...”

“Wh-What’s that?”

“Maids! We don’t have a single person to attend to your needs, King Takuto!”

“Oh? Now that you mention it, that’s true.”

With that comment, Takuto realized for the first time that a maid was

indispensable for a king.

He'd been fine until now because Atou had been taking care of his needs. Besides, he was the type who did things for himself, so it never occurred to him to want one. But their new home was quite large. They'd obviously run into various inconveniences living alone together in such a big Palace.

On top of that, it seemed wrong to continue living the way they had before now that their empire had stabilized somewhat. After all, Takuto was the King of Mynoghra and the Commander of the Dark Elves.

Some people were sure to object to a king doing everything for himself.

At the very least, it was unacceptable to the girl who'd openly declared she lived to serve him.

"I'm a failure! A failure as a servant!"

So it was only obvious that Atou whined about it. She actually had a valid point, but the way she threw a tantrum like a child made it come across more like selfish whining.

And it almost always fell to Takuto to talk her down.

"Don't overreact. I don't mind not having one."

"I mind! What kind of maid do you want?!"

She rushed up to him, closing the distance like a predatory cat, and questioned him like he didn't have a choice in the matter.

Sensing he wasn't getting out of this one that easy now that she'd entered this mode, Takuto rubbed his chin between his fingers. But nothing really came to mind.

He honestly wasn't interested in things like chamberlains. Plus, he was nervous he wouldn't be able to talk to some stranger suddenly charged with caring for him. That'd only stress him out.

So, he had only one requirement.

"S-Someone who's easy to talk to."

"KING TAKUTOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Atou cried—cried for her king who still became tongue-tied around others.

She sidled up to him and offered all sorts of comforting words, but Takuto's good mood rarely returned after it'd deflated. He sat on top of the throne, hugging his knees, muttering sad things.

"Ugh... I feel super alienated not being able to talk to the Dark Elves. I want to be a friendlier king..."

"Er, you are a bit too regal, King Takuto," Atou began, telling him something he never expected to hear, "...So I believe they are afraid of you."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

His eyes bulged with surprise.

Why is anyone afraid of me? And what the heck does 'regal' mean in this situation???

But she was right about one thing: fear gleamed in every Dark Elf's eyes when they looked at him, albeit less now than at the beginning. They didn't show the same kind of fear while interacting with Atou.

Takuto understood how they felt.

Talking to important people can make anyone nervous.

Once, during his past life, a big-time doctor from a university hospital traveled a long distance just to treat him. He vividly remembered how uncomfortable that made him feel, so he figured the Dark Elves must feel the same around him. He couldn't help feeling disappointed by that.

"Forever a loner..."

Those three sad words slipped from his lips.

His confidant blanched at the reality her king was going to be forever alone.

"I-I...will be with you foreeeeeeeeeever!" Atou cried, clinging to him.

Realizing he'd probably be a gloomy Gus forever if he didn't have her, Takuto felt grateful he had such a devoted and affectionate confidant at his side.

Ahh, just how blessed am I? I'm such a lucky guy to have a girl who cares this much about me.

Pure bliss filled him.

“Oooh! I just struck upon a genius idea!”

However, his bliss dissipated in an instant, replaced by a cold sweat that trickled down his forehead.

Nothing good ever came from one of Atou’s ideas, especially those she was extra enthusiastic about.

“Will you leave it to me, my king? I came up with the best solution ever!”

“Er, uh...c-can you slow down and explain first—”

“Won’t you leave it to me, Atou, your loyal servant?!”

She cut him off, pushing her demands on him without explaining.

When it came down to it, Takuto was a softie where Atou was concerned. The biggest softie you’d ever find.

Thus, he had no reason to refuse her when she asked to be put in control of matters with such confidence.

So, Takuto gave in—fully.

“Of course!”

He granted her permission to act with a big smile, throwing in the towel and hoping he wouldn’t regret whatever came next.



“**ELDER** Moltar! Gather all the little girls! This is His Majesty’s wish!”

“HUH?!”

Two shocked utterances echoed through the Throne Room. One belonged to Elder Moltar after he heard that abrupt command, and the other belonged to Takuto after hearing the same thing.

“P-Please explain a little more first, Lady Atou! F-For what reason has that order been passed down? What is His Majesty thinking?”

“His Majesty *loves* little girls!”

Takuto cursed himself for handing the matter completely over to her several

hours earlier. Hating himself, he cradled his head in his hand and concentrated all his nerves on overcoming this rocky situation.

“H-His Majesty I-loves little girls...”

Takuto felt all eyes on him.

Gia and Emle were also present for this conversation.

Every Dark Elf in the room had shifted their dubious gaze to him.

They were giving him cringe-worthy looks, driving home the point that he was now placed at a crossroads.

“ATOU!”

So, he shouted.

If he didn’t correct this misunderstanding now, he would be stuck with a much worse badge than just sucking at holding a conversation.

His voice had come out much louder than he’d expected, telling him that he could speak for himself when he really wanted to.



“HA! Ha! Ha! I see, I see. I should’ve expected His Majesty to have such an ingenious idea as keeping the innocent children by his side to teach them not to be bound by our outdated common sense.”

“It’s certainly a good idea. Children often say the darnedest things, perplexing even adults.”

How long did that explanation take?

To Takuto, it felt like an eternity, but it was worth defending himself like his life depended on it to avoid being forever dubbed a *lolicon*—a man with a fetish for little girls.

Wouldn’t young girls be easier than adult women for him to talk to with his communication disorder?

Atou likely adopted this strategy with that reasoning, but how she went about it definitely shaved a few years off his second life.

One wrong move and he would've been treated like a pedophile. He'd be known as the Lolicon King.

Takuto had every right to shout and defend himself like it was the end of the world. With every gear in his head turning at full speed, he had desperately conveyed a believable explanation to Atou with his eyes, and Elder Moltar and Gia interpreted it just as he'd hoped.

Something about it still didn't sit right with him, but it worked enough not to be outright ridiculous. It was the perfect save.

"Not only that, but His Majesty is being considerate by not adding this extra work to the adults. While being the King's caretaker might sound like a big job, he only needs help with basic tasks. Even young children should be capable of doing simple chores," Atou explained, further convincing Elder Moltar and Gia.

But her remarks didn't dispel Takuto's concerns. It made sense on paper but did nothing to clear his name of potential *lolicon* accusations.

"Oh? Then couldn't boys serve that role as well?"

"There's more to it than that."

Takuto reacted at the speed of light to the question Gia casually uttered.

He was on course to being forever dubbed as the Lolicon King. So he interjected himself into the conversation without a second thought, hoping that suggesting there was more to it than what was explained would put an end to it.

"Hmm. I see. His Majesty seems to have something greater in mind. Please honor us with an explanation from your deep abyss of knowledge, my king."

But, of course, they wanted to know more than that.

Elder Moltar shouldn't be criticized for asking the most obvious question, but Takuto was always put on the spot when it came to this wise old man.

I-I can't say I have nothing in mind, can I...?

Elder Moltar stared at him with anticipation. Faltering under that probing gaze, Takuto kicked his brain into high gear to come up with a suitable excuse.

He glanced over at Atou, the source of his problems. She was looking at him with stars in her eyes, impressed by his ingenuity giving her proposal greater meaning.

What a complete and utter misunderstanding.

Hold on. What if I say it's to nurture future leader candidates? Especially since there are fewer girls in leadership positions among the Dark Elves.

A miraculously good idea hit Takuto just as it was getting harder to tide things over with a meaningful pause.

As things stood, Mynoghra had a shortage of talented people to fill critical leadership roles. Elder Moltar, Gia, and Emle were doing their best to manage things, but the amount of work always exceeded the number of workers.

They were in this much of a bind just managing a group of several hundred people. The number of jobs requiring intelligent, trained leaders would only multiply as Mynoghra became a bigger empire.

But they didn't have an endless supply of personnel to recklessly burden with empire management tasks. Jobs had already been assigned to every Dark Elf, and each was necessary to keep the empire running.

Entrusting them with the work of a civil official on top of their regular job would push them from sweatshop working conditions to downright slavery. That was the last thing Takuto wanted for his empire.

As it was, his stomach twisted with the thought of how much work he was asking them to do. He truly wanted to reduce the load he was placing on the Dark Elves, and he'd also instructed them to take holidays.

In other words, no one with a job in Mynoghra had time to play around. And they currently had no capable people to entrust new tasks to. In that case, while it was a little crazy to suddenly bring up educating young children to take on future leadership roles, it did make sense logically.

“Leader candidates. It's to help nurture them...for the future.”

“Ooooh! So that's what you had in mind, Your Majesty!”

Even if the plan failed, it wouldn't cause much damage. On the contrary,

teaching children his values while they were still young would make having talented subordinates who were in sync with him more than just a dream.

Atou and the Dark Elves are trying their best, but they're short-sighted in some areas. I need someone who can give me good advice when the need arises.

Once he turned the faucet of his ideas on, the advantages of this plan poured out like hot water.

Of course, it also helped him come up with an answer to the question: "Why are you only offering this opportunity to little girls instead of all children?"

This world was still in the developmental stage of civilization, and therefore the values of bygone eras, which were at odds with Takuto's modern values, were pervasive.

Put simply, men are to work while women take care of the home.

The Dark Elves had vowed they wouldn't forget their gratitude to the King and would devote everything to Mynoghra, but there were many situations where they were bound by their culture's common sense to the point where they couldn't come up with advanced, aggressive new ideas.

Therefore, if left unchecked, women in this world would be confined to the norm of raising a family and tending to the home without knowing they could do more if they wanted to. Of course, some worked too, but at best, they helped with the farm and took on homemaker side jobs. In fact, Mynoghra's citizens who fell under the housewife category were also in charge of that kind of work.

Emle was the rare one out, having been Gia's adjutant. Although there were rare cases of certain groups allowing someone with special talents like her to shine, the concept of social progress and women moving up in the world practically didn't exist here.

Takuto wasn't going to try to change the world, but given his empire's shortage of personnel, he thought it was terrible to let young girls' talents go to waste when he could actually do something about it.

Thus, Takuto passionately spoke about how this would aid the girls without arousing any suspicions about him having unsavory motives.

“Then shouldn’t we hold a grand test to select the right people to impart your great wisdom to, King Takuto?”

“We don’t have the people for that, and it’s experimental at this stage.”

Yes, this was an experiment. Just a test. There was nothing to lose if it didn’t work and much to gain if it succeeded.

But Takuto was fairly confident this plan would have some success.

Dark Elves have long lifespans. They don’t live for thousands of years like the typical elves found in fantasy stories. But they’re still a long-lived species with an average lifespan of about two hundred years.

Although he’d only be instructing the ignorant children tending to him during his spare time, they would likely mature into excellent subordinates after dedicating years to their training. The only potential kink in his plan was that he didn’t know how long he would live now that he’d become the King of Mynoghra, but he doubted he was stuck with a human lifespan.

He could worry about that when it actually became a problem, and he already had several strategies in mind for when the time came.

For now, he was focused on nurturing human—or rather Dark Elf—resources.

The plan was to implement Mynoghra’s take on the apprenticeship system. While it was unprecedented for a king to take on apprentices, the necessity, advantages, and grounds for doing so were sufficient enough to merit it.

Takuto was convinced he’d flawlessly come up with the perfect excuse. He was in awe of his ability to develop a genius plan amid great mental turmoil.

He slowly explained the details to the others as they struck him. He relished the reverent and awestruck looks Elder Moltar, Gia, Emle, and even Atou were giving him.

Takuto was also excited about it. Now he could finally comfortably practice talking to others with the girls as his conversational partners.

Well, it’s not like the world will end if I don’t get better in a day! I’m sure I’ll get over my people anxiety if I try.

In the end, that’s what Takuto was really after.

Atou's crazy proposal forced him to talk his way out of being forever labeled the Lolicon King, but he definitely wanted to work on his lack of communication skills too.

"I'll be! His Majesty continues to present us with ingenious plans. I'm ashamed by how boldly we claimed to support you when you continue to aid us!"

"Indeed! I never imagined His Majesty was already thinking about raising up future leaders. Just how big of a picture does our king see...?"

"I wouldn't expect anything less of our king! We will devote even more of ourselves to you, Your Majesty!"

"I'm not that great."

Their praise was excessive, but it'd be worse for everyone involved to correct them too much. So, Takuto just went with it.

He was in high spirits for getting through that crisis by the skin of his teeth. He wasn't really sure what to think about maid culture, but he was interested in it.

Plus, who wouldn't be happy to be surrounded by girls?

Takuto shared the same sensibilities as most men.

He'd definitely be more motivated to run the empire on a daily basis if the Palace had more flowerlike girls than just being full of squalid, butch men. Not to mention, he'd much rather practice talking to women.

All right! You're going down, communication disorder!

Takuto fired himself up.

He'd outright deny it if anyone confronted him about it, but he was surprisingly all for this particular plan.

"I can't wait," he muttered to himself, his subordinates bowing before hurriedly leaving the Throne Room to put the plan into action.



"M-MY king...they are just children."

"It's fine."

Jumping straight to the conclusion: the plan to employ young girls as maids was on the verge of absolute failure.

Unknown factors are inevitable with every plan.

Of course, he probably should've expected this to happen, but this result came about because Takuto underestimated how others viewed him.

In short, every Dark Elf girl who'd been handpicked for the role broke down crying the second they saw Takuto. Not even he could conceal his shock. It was pitiful seeing how depressed it made him, slumped over in his throne as if he'd been rejected by every girl in the world.

"His Majesty is sulking! Are there no children capable of looking at the King without crying?!" Atou raged, Takuto's depression too much for her to bear.

"None. This is all the children in our empire..." Elder Moltar said quietly.

"Weak! Such weaklings!!"

At his wit's end, Elder Moltar looked to Gia for help, who was standing at his side, pondering something with his arms crossed.

"Elder Moltar, did you introduce His Majesty to those twins?"

"N-Nay... I didn't want to offend the King with them."

"...Hm? Enlighten me!"

As soon as Atou's ears picked up on their conversation, she darted over to them at the speed of light from where she'd been throwing a tantrum next to Takuto.

Elder Moltar genuinely didn't want to go with Gia's plan, so he reluctantly talked about the twin girls at his superior's orders.

"H-How should I explain this? There are two orphan twin girls. They are certainly brilliant, but they are a tad problematic. I believe they are unfit to serve the King."

"Hmm? You're beating around the Flesh Tree too much. Clever children are perfectly fit for the role. Well, I'll decide when I see them for myself. Please bring them here."

Elder Moltar couldn't refuse a direct order from Atou. Groaning unhappily, he bowed and turned to leave. But Gia butt into the conversation faster than Elder Moltar could leave to fetch the twins.

"I've already fetched them."

"Gia! You do quick work!"

"Ha! Unlike a certain doddering old man, I'm always thinking two or three steps ahead to serve you, Your Majesty. My mind works faster than a senile one."

"You conniving upstart!"

Atou sighed at the two glaring Dark Elves. The sight of them competing to see who was more devoted to the King had become as commonplace as three meals a day. Exasperated that they were going at it again, Atou put in a few words to stop their childish bickering and shifted the topic toward the final two maid candidates.

"Okay, okay, we might be looking for children, but we don't want you acting like them with your quarreling. So bring the twins here now. Come on, hop to it."

"Yes, ma'am! Gladly!"

At long last, Gia urged the two girls into the Throne Room.

...As soon as the twins entered, Atou's eyebrows visibly moved upward.

The girls were probably around twelve to thirteen years old. They were relatively older than the other girls they had an audience with, but age didn't matter in this evaluation.

They passed the first stage of the interview when they saw Takuto and didn't bawl their eyes out. But they had a strange aura about them. And it wasn't just their aura—their appearance also gave away the fact that there was more to them.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, great king. I'm Caria Elfuur. I go by Cary."

The twin girls entered the room holding hands like the best of friends.

The girl on the right politely introduced herself and bowed. Her silver hair, distinct to all Dark Elves, was cut to ear length, and she was wearing revealing traditional clothing that emphasized mobility. But a reddish-brown burn scar stuck out like a sore thumb on the right side of her beautiful face. The burn scars marred not only her face but also traveled down her whole right side, from her shoulder to her foot.

She showed off those scars proudly as if owning them and the story they told.

“I’m the big sister,” the girl on the left greeted with a carefree smile.

Her silver hair reached her feet, and she wore a more conservative dress and shawl in direct contrast to her younger sister’s revealing attire. Her outfit gave her a look of purity that dazzled Atou.

But her casual greeting was grounds for disqualification. Atou was going to scold her for her rudeness until she noticed something was off about the girl.

“Big Sista’s name is Maria Elfuur.”

Atou was convinced the girl was broken when her younger sister introduced her instead. Her carefree, vapid smile said it all.

Atou determined she had sustained some sort of traumatic damage that left her in a mental state that was far younger than her biological age and pardoned her rudeness.

“Nice to meet you.”

The words Takuto worked up all his courage to say echoed through the Throne Room. He didn’t seem to feel one thing or another about the girls, his gaze signaling Atou to take care of the rest.

Determining her king didn’t mind whatever ailed the twin girls, Atou decided to start testing whether the girls were suitable to serve in the capacities he desired.

Although...

“A dullard and damaged goods...”

Maria the dullard and Caria the disfigured.

They certainly seem like children with a story... Are they truly fit to serve as the King's maids?

Those thoughts crossed Atou's mind as she scrutinized the two girls.





Mynoghra's Palace (Lv.1)

Building

Obtain the following every turn:

Magic Power: 10

Ruin Mana: 1

※ This facility doesn't have an Upkeep cost.

NO IMAGE

Description

~Every empire has a palace. Its majesty is what informs the world of the glory and prosperity of the nation. ~

Every empire can only have one Palace at a time. Palaces are unique facilities that produce **Magic Power** and **Mana** corresponding to that empire's element every turn. They can be upgraded to a higher level by unlocking certain technologies in the skill tree. The city where this building is located will be considered the empire's capital, and civilian **Happiness** will plummet if the Palace is ever destroyed or invaded.

The air was tense inside the Throne Room where Takuto was law.

Head cocked, Atou assessed the aberrant twins. Being a monster that existed outside the realm of logic herself, Atou asked the girls about themselves without an ounce of hesitation or fear.

“What are those scabby scars, girl?”

“The result of a disease.”

“Poor thing.”

“They suit me just fine...Your Majesty,” Caria said simply, falling silent after speaking her piece.

Takuto also didn’t seem interested in pressing her to explain.

Elder Moltar explained on behalf of the twins that the scabs came from a plague and that they still left a mark even after full recovery. Whatever the reason for the scars, Atou decided not to pry into the matter further. She didn’t care as long as it wouldn’t negatively affect her king.

“What happened to your big sister?”

“Something bad happened to Big Sista...”

“Something bad?”

“She ate Mommy.”

“Moltar?”

Atou shot Moltar a questioning look. Her eyes were asking: “What does the younger sister mean by that?” She was only asking to confirm what she’d already inferred about their situation...

“It was a lamentable decision. Their mother was a proud and noble woman. Our entire clan has never forgotten her sacrifice...”

His comment reminded Takuto of the agonized expressions the Dark Elves made when he’d explained the effects of the Flesh Tree. At the time, he’d believe they were repulsed by the mysterious effects the tree had on the psyche by making people feel like they were indeed eating human flesh...

But that wasn't the case.

Reality is stranger and crueller than fiction.

Yes, the Dark Elves could no longer stand their hunger and had turned to eating their clansmen.

Chased out of their homeland, they journeyed endlessly in search of a new home. The long journey forced their race to make extreme decisions to survive.

Maybe there was another option.

There may have been a way for everyone to reach the Accursed Lands alive.

But it was meaningless to bring that up after the fact.

Besides, Atou wasn't in a position to judge their choices, nor did she care to. But it was easy for her to see that, to them, it was an abdominal, distressing decision. Moreover, what they did to survive had eternally scarred the two young girls...

The puffy scabs and scars on Caria's skin looked like they were due just as much to burns as to the plague. The relentless burn marks on her face appeared intentional and oozed with the hatred of the hand that did it.

Maria's glassy eyes held more in common with the dead than the living, and madness could be seen in her innocence.

...Now I understand why Elder Moltar was reluctant to introduce them, Atou thought, finally convinced of the sage's decision.

Judging by their healthy complexions, they weren't treated as outcasts. It seemed unlikely he didn't want to reveal the twins because he wanted to hide the clan's tragic past.

The problem lay in the deep scars haunting them both.

Caria was hideous because of her disfiguration, disqualifying her as a Palace maid. And Maria was unlikely to do a satisfactory job with any task given her childlike naiveté.

They fit what the King and Atou were looking for. But how could anyone recommend them in this state?

Atou could imagine why the withered old sage struggled with how to handle them. She was also stumped over how to proceed. Although the final decision ultimately lay with the King, he'd granted her full authority over this matter.

The twins left much to be desired as a representation of the King. But their mental fortitude in his presence was hard to pass up on too...

"Your Majesty, so white."

Before Atou realized it, one of the girls—the older sister, Maria—had walked right up to Takuto. She peered at him with her big, round eyes.

Takuto didn't seem particularly surprised and answered her query.

"What's white?"

"Hmm? I wonder what is?"

That wasn't a very good answer, but it appeared to pull on Takuto's heartstrings. A gentle smile touched his lips as he gently patted Maria on the head.

"You're Maria, right? Will you become my caretaker?"

"Mm-hm... I'll take care of the King."

"Okay. There will be a lot of things for you to remember and do, but do you think you can put your all into it?"

"...I probably can."

"Then, from this day onward, you will be a future leader candidate for the great Mynoghra. I have high hopes for you. You'll get paid for your work too."

"...I'll buy lots of candy."

"H-His Majesty is—our king is actually holding a real conversation with a little girl!!"

Atou's inner debate instantly solved itself in this moment.

I was right! Our king can actually talk if his conversation partner is a young girl! If he uses this opportunity to rehabilitate, his communication problems will be solved, and a weight will be lifted off him!

With that in mind, Atou decided on the spot to employ the twins. For better or worse, she prioritized actual gains over external appearances.

Takuto's attention shifted from Maria, who'd accepted the candy he'd produced with Emergency Production, to the younger sister.

Caria froze up like a deer in the headlights.

Unlike her older sister, she seemed somewhat scared of Takuto. Her reaction was the correct one under normal circumstances. If anything, the way she stood her ground despite her fear impressed Takuto.

"A-As the younger sister, Cary's o-bligated to stay with Big Sista. I-If that's what Big Sista wants, then I'll try my bestest too."

"That's admirable. Really admirable... Then, will you stay with me too?" Takuto asked.

"Y-You can count on me!"

Thus, the two girls were picked as Takuto's maids.

Looking relieved, Elder Moltar and the others encouraged the girls to work hard.

"His Majesty approves of them, so we will have the girls serve as his caretakers from now on."

Atou was also pleased that everything went well. And Takuto could finally breathe again, knowing that he'd finally secured maids and escaped judgment as a Lolicon King.

Just like that, the lonely Palace, where only Takuto and Atou lived, finally had two new, flowery additions.



AFTER that, the two maids began working at the Palace, and Takuto thought he'd finally freed up some time in his personal life.

But reality is never so kind.

Takuto's life had become twice as hectic and problematic than before.

"Your Majesty, your drink."

“Thanks.”

“Oops, I spilled.”

“I-It’s okay.”

With a splash, Takuto’s clothes were wet and sticky.

Maria had messed up. It happened every time, so Takuto’s surprise had melted into indifference by now. Although that didn’t change the fact she kept doing it. Thanks to that, the clothing the Dark Elf women made by hand for him were full of stains.

Takuto also wasn’t keen on scolding the girls either. He wanted to value their effort, and he couldn’t really get angry at children for making childlike mistakes.

Plus...

“Y-Your Majesty! I’ll wipe it up for you!”

“Thanks.”

Who could be angry when Caria blanched and tried so hard to make up for her older sister’s mistakes? She appeared to deeply love and respect her older sister and put in ten times the work to clean up after her. Meanwhile, she still seemed afraid of Takuto.

Hence, Takuto had a hard time gauging what kind of approach he should take with her. That was why things remained awkward on a daily basis.

From the outside, Takuto looked like a pitiful older brother with two problematic younger sisters trying their best and always failing to help out around the house. It really was putting him in a frustrating position.

But today was different.

Normally, the older sister always wandered outside to play after finishing some random work, but this time she curiously stayed there, staring intently into Takuto’s eyes.

“Your Majesty.”

“What is it?”

“Are you an evil person?”

“I’m evil-aligned, yeah.”

Takuto had come to this world as the Commander of the evil civilization of Mynoghra. Thus, his alignment was evil, which was why he replied the way he did.

Of course, since the girls were Mynoghra’s citizens, they were also evil-aligned. Hence, their question puzzled him.

“Why don’t you kill?”

“Who?”

“...Us.”

“Huh?”

“U-Um, you see, Big Sista’s asking why the great King Takuto is being merciful to worthless children like us.”

Caria’s explanation sent Takuto into pensive thought, his arms folded as he groaned.

Why wouldn’t I be merciful? They’re my vassals. And they’re children. I’d never consider punishing them, and if they do anything really bad, I’d just scold them for it. Killing would be so savage.

Do I scare them that badly?

Feeling a little sorry for them, Takuto tried his best to answer their question in a gentle voice.

“Because you’re my caretakers.”

“Grr!” Maria growled at him like an angry little animal.

“Big Sista’s angry at you for being an evil person but a kind king...”

“Seriously...?”

Takuto was baffled even though he thought it was cute how she expressed herself with angry sounds. But since he had a general idea of what they were trying to say, he calmly addressed the problem with them.

They’re probably confused by their sudden alignment change, he concluded.

“Okay, let’s have a little talk. Put your listening caps on, girls.”

Both girls pretended to put on imaginary caps in the most adorable way, their attention wholly devoted to Takuto.

“A good person can only do good things. They can’t hurt others or steal their things. And they must never kill, right?”

“Right!”

“Obviously.”

“Okay, then what about an evil person? What should they do?”

“They can only do evil things!”

“Anything wicked!”

The girls responded like that was the only right answer.

Takuto anticipated their responses and had his reply ready.

“Wrong. An evil person can do *anything* they want.”

Their eyes went wide with surprise.

Takuto chuckled at their precious reaction but made sure to continue his point, not wanting it to get lost before he could drive it home.

“You can do good *or* bad things. You can do everything and anything, or you can do nothing. For you see, an evil person is incredibly selfish and free. They just have to believe in what they think is right, never listen to others, and charge ahead without looking back. That’s what defines a true evil person,” he paused there, then added with a playful wink, “So it’s okay for me to be nice to you, because I want to!”

“That’s no fair!!”

“Well, duh! Evil people don’t have to be fair, silly!”

“Will evil ever be punished?”

“Only if you can’t kill the good person doling out the punishment first.”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” both girls cried out in unison.

Takuto passionately explained his pet theory, smiling wryly at himself for how

easy it was for him to speak at length on this topic. As he did, he was struck by a certain realization. If his guess was correct, then it'd explain the true motives behind Maria's actions and questions.

In other words—

“All of your mistakes until now were on purpose, weren't they?”

The older sister gave a big nod, her eyes no longer clouded and glassy; the younger sister quivered in fear.

Their reaction promoted Takuto's hunch to a surety.

“I see...”

He'd finally reached the answer.

She—they—wanted to die.

Takuto had already learned from prior discussions that the Dark Elves had cannibalized their own people to stave off starvation. And he knew their mother was a victim of that.

He might not have the best understanding of a family's love, but he knew that their mother had sacrificed herself to save them out of love. Whether the girls wanted to be burdened with the trauma their mother forever placed on them was an altogether different matter.

They probably never desired this outcome.

“Cary and...Cary's Big Sista—”

“—should've died.”

Maria continued her younger sister's sentence with a logical coldness that felt like it couldn't have come from someone with a broken mind.

Maybe, her mind was never truly shattered.

She just despised herself so much, her hatred painted the world black, only allowing childlike thoughts to breach the surface. Something about her gave off that feeling.

“But you're scared to die?” Takuto asked.

Both girls gave a small nod.

They couldn't forgive themselves for surviving through their mother's death—they wanted to die so badly, but it was too scary to take their own lives. They longed for someone to kill them, letting their despair kill them on the inside, their own minds hurting them more than any external factor.

Thinking that if they did things to earn the King's wrath, he'd surely kill them, they lived every day seeking salvation through death.

That was the plight haunting the two girls who had committed the taboo of cannibalism.

Takuto silently beckoned them closer. Sensing the cry for help they couldn't conceal from their eyes, he desperately searched for the right words to save these two innocent and kindhearted souls.

"You girls are here for a reason. There is someone who kept you alive, that's why you can't die. You know who that person is, don't you?"

"It hurts..."

"It's so painful."

Ahh, these girls are so deeply loved.

Takuto found that to be the most precious thing of all.

What a moving and beautiful love! he thought.

He'd never received any love or affection from his family. That's why he struggled to wrap his head around some aspects of it, but even he could easily tell these girls had a powerful bond with their mother.

At this rate, their love was bound to be lost forever.

Their minds would eventually break for good, and then they would be broken in the truest sense.

For some reason, it pained Takuto to know this wonderful love would vanish due to worthless crap like ethics and common sense.

"...What did your mother tell you?"

"Live on..." the twins said together.

An obvious choice, Takuto thought.

Given the love between them, it was no wonder their mother told them to live on.

So, he sincerely took what they said to heart and offered them thoughtful words that would resonate with their souls.

“Evil things aren’t always the wrong thing. You and your mother did the right thing... Be proud. You are both standing here today because your mother’s love prevailed against fate.”

Those words had an absoluteness to them.

Takuto had an air of inaccessibility and majesty that separated him from just someone playing the role of an evil Commander.

The girls were consumed by his words and left feeling as if their souls had been lost. Their sense of self was on the verge of collapsing as they were enveloped by some monstrous entity beyond cognitive recognition.

It was a horrifying, terribly sweet experience.

Their great and mighty king erased the self-destructive feelings that were devouring their mind and souls. Only a deep love for their mother was left after their common sense, ethics, anxiety, and loss disappeared.

“Your Majesty, what in the world—”

“—should we do?”

Tears spilled down their cheeks.

Did they weep because their anguish had been wiped clean or because they were moved by their new understanding of how much their mother loved them?

Either way, the two girls were crying.

Takuto had no way of knowing this, but...those were the first tears they’d shed since losing their mother.

“Live as your heart desires. Live up to your mother’s love, in a way that makes her proud.” He gently embraced them both. “Remember this: you are free. You

are free *to do* and *not to do* whatever you want. As long as it is something your mother would be proud of, I will bless every choice you girls make.”

Innocent eyes fixated on him.

Takuto didn't know if anything had changed for them. But relief washed over him when he noticed the slight change in their once harrowed expressions.

Just like that, the two little girls were influenced by the King's words, bringing them some salvation.



“**KING** Takuto! I finished the investigation.”

“Welcome back...”

“*Hm-mm?* What happened here?”

“We got better acquainted.”

Atou returned to the Palace after finishing her miscellaneous tasks and frowned when she saw the King.

Nothing particularly problematic had happened while she was away.

Well, maybe it looked problematic to her.

The two girls, who were supposed to be Palace maids, were sleeping on either side of Takuto on the throne, their expressions blissful.

“Don't tell me you *actually* laid your hands on them?”

Atou accidentally let her disrespectful thoughts slip out. Her judgmental gaze pierced Takuto simply because she was jealous of the two young girls.

“No way! Anyway, report! Give me your report!!!”

“Oh, pardon me then. I wanted to talk to you about our findings on the nearby town.”

They had started a more thorough investigation on the town closest to Mynoghra, which they'd discovered early on. They were stealthily collecting information in a way that wouldn't provoke their neighbors since Takuto wanted to be on friendly terms if possible.

It appeared the investigation results were in.

He didn't mind having her report the gist of things orally, leaving the finer details to a paper report later.

I wonder what kind of neighbors we have.

Takuto suppressed his wandering thoughts and concentrated on Atou's report.

"...It's a town belonging to the neutral nation of Phon'kaven, which is a multiracial empire consisting primarily of Beastmen and Humans. The town is known as Dragontan."

"They're multiracial, huh...?"

Multiracial nations, by their very nature, contain a variety of cultures and values. Meaning they may be more open to negotiating with an evil empire if the circumstances are right. If nothing else, there shouldn't be an all-out war the second they meet like with a holy empire.

However, they couldn't be too optimistic until they learned what the neighboring empire's policies were. Depending on the other empire's convictions, negotiations could break down, leading to war.

"What's the population break down?" Takuto asked.

"Half are Humans, and the other half is made up of Beastmen races such as Werewolves and Werecoats. They fall in line with what we know of them."

"So, just your typical fantasy demi-humans?"

"Exactly. There are just a lot of subtypes. They have a council system of government, run by Shamans known as Staff Holders."

A council system of government means multiple people decide the empire's management policies. Using this system makes it much easier to prevent an empire from abruptly running off course because there is no king to give absolute orders like in an absolute monarchy, but on the other hand, it's also easier for opinions to be divided, leading to disputes and slower decision-making.

"Their civilization isn't very developed. They aren't too interested in

technological advancement as they have a deeply rooted indigenous religion that worships nature spirits.”

“That probably also has to do with a lack of Resources in the south to devote to science and technology. But, either way, they don’t seem like much of a threat,” Takuto concluded.

Going by what he just heard, they didn’t seem like a very advanced empire. If anything, the fact they still had a council government led by Shamans gave the strong impression they had yet to escape an old, antiquated culture.

“I was able to confirm my suspicions with the extra information Emle provided, but they are a surprisingly orthodox neutral empire. Put in *Eternal Nations*’ terms, they aren’t cunning enough to suddenly declare war on us after ten turns,” Atou explained while unfolding a map.

“Oh?” Takuto tilted his head as he confirmed Phon’kaven’s territory on the map.

Phon’kaven’s main territory was located much further east than he’d expected, and only the town of Dragontan existed out in the middle of nowhere.

“Huh. This town is awfully isolated from the rest of their territory. Why did they build it way out here? It costs to move supplies that far, and the burden of defending this spot is too great to not have a good reason.”

Takuto scrutinized the available information and started to plot his strategies around it. But then he suddenly caught the meaningful look on Atou’s face and stopped mulling. “Is there more?”

“Yes, I actually have something to report on that front.”

“Why do you sound so serious? Did you discover something bad?”

“It appears the town was built around a Dragon Vein Mine.”

“Now *that’s* interesting...”

Takuto’s eyes narrowed.

Another empire had built a town where a Dragon Vein Mine existed. That could only mean that the empire possessed some form of Military Technology

related to magic.



Dragon Vein Mine

Map Resource

Gain the Following Every Turn

Pure Mana: 1

This special land is where the planet's vast amounts of **Mana** gush out. Every **Magic** unit will be able to use powerful **Tactical Magic** with this **Mana**. Some **Hero** units also become more powerful with **Mana** reserves. Securing more **Mana** than other empires will give you a greater advantage to win.

Chapter 2: Meeting

TAKUTO was in such a good mood that day, anyone who saw him could tell. And why wouldn't he be when the time had finally come for him to devote himself to his absolute favorite pastime: Domestic Affairs.

Lately, there had been many annoying events to tend to, such as the Holy Kingdom of Qualia's recon team and surveying the neighboring empires' motives. The peace of mind granted by clearing those events helped improve his mood.

Perhaps his vassals sensed their king was in high spirits, since the meeting about to take place had a relatively relaxed atmosphere despite the air of tension.

"Thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us."

Atou was heading up the meeting as always. Her eyes swept over the people present with a polished smile.

Mynoghra's leaders were all in attendance today: Elder Moltar, Warrior Captain Gia, and Emle, who'd been promoted from Gia's adjutant to Takuto's private secretary and advisor. Takuto's caretakers, Maria and Caria, were also joining them. And naturally, no meeting would be held without Takuto and Atou present.

"All right, it's time to begin the ever-so-fun-and-lovely Domestic Affairs turn! Let's hear the status reports first, starting with the person in charge of construction."

"Hello. I'm Emle, and I'm in charge of construction. Construction of the Palace is now complete, freeing up some of our workforce. I had everyone devote their spare time to replenishing Lumber, so we have plenty of Materials. Construction of new buildings can begin at any time."

"Good to know. Thank you. We should build something new while we can

afford it.” Atou nodded, satisfied with Emle’s ability to concisely provide the information she sought.

As Emle pointed out, Mynoghra’s Imperial Capital was in a state where it could afford to build more facilities. They didn’t want to overextend their valuable working force when they didn’t have to. Still, the facilities belonging to the civilization of Mynoghra brought various benefits to the empire, and the general consensus was to build and improve the ones they needed first.

“King Takuto, is it all right to construct the facility we discussed?”

“**Yep,**” Takuto answered Atou with a nod.

As a matter of fact, Atou had spoken with Takuto at length about Mynoghra’s policies before the meeting. Nevertheless, there were several reasons for still holding the meeting like this.

The primary reasons were allocating work to their vassals, reducing the load on Takuto and Atou, and ensuring they didn’t overlook any potential problems. The secondary reason was to gain new perspectives and awareness by listening to citizen opinions. In addition, by having the Dark Elves participate in the meeting, their sense of belonging to the empire would be strengthened, encouraging them to work even harder toward their common goals.

Meetings were held even when they didn’t have the time for it due to these reasons. It was one thing to run an empire of this scale, but it’d eventually grow too big for Takuto to manage entirely alone. The realistic constraints of processing vast amounts of information forced Takuto and Atou to choose methods that wouldn’t have been necessary for a video game.

“In that case, please construct a Clinic next, Emle,” Atou said. “We want to avoid losing you, our citizens, at any cost right now. Military facilities are important too, but nothing can get done without workers.”

“Noted. I will let the building supervisors know after the meeting.”

Deciding which facilities to build next was actually quite the headache. There were a number of appealing candidates, such as the Sumptuous Meat Forest, which raises the rate of population growth at the cost of increased Food consumption, and Living Reeds, which gives a defense bonus when an enemy

attacks one of your cities. However, both were rejected because they didn't offer immediate benefits.

So, they went with a Clinic, which considerably contributes to the prosperity of the empire and guarantees existing citizen health and longevity. The Magic Research Institute, which produces Magic units and increases the production of Magic Power in the city, also remained as a candidate until the end. However, it was temporarily put on hold until they had the right personnel for the job.

One of the main reasons they decided on the Clinic was because its construction costs were low, and it could be built relatively quickly. Of course, they had already agreed the Magic Research Institute would be built next.

"Next on the agenda is Domestic Affairs," Atou said, smoothly moving the meeting to the next topic. "Who is in charge of updating us on the Resource situation?"

"I am also in charge of that," Emle answered. "We are steadily building up a good domestic food supply. Our Lumber and Stone supplies are in good order, and His Majesty is also providing us with Iron goods and the like that we can't manufacture ourselves. However, I'm starting to think the expense is not worth the gain given how much Mana and Magic it consumes."

Takuto's ability to summon items was the real reason the Dark Elves, who only had the clothes on their backs, were able to build an imperial capital's foundation in such a short time. His ability to produce unique items and supplies from his world provided them with iron products, clothes, and various other tools that were usually difficult to obtain.

Producing the items obviously consumed Mana and Magic, but Mynoghra only had a population of around five hundred. Supplying goods for these numbers didn't even dent his reserves. However, this brute force solution only worked because they had such a small population.

"Emergency Production with Magic is just so convenient to use. It's a necessary expenditure, so we'll continue to make the most of it. With that in mind, it really escalates the priority level for facilities and research that increase Magic Power production. Also, I'll be sure to give you a bigger salary, Emle. Thank you for putting in so much work for your two posts..."

“Thank you.”

Atou became keenly aware of their shortage of talented personnel as she watched Emle bow. But that matter was still being shelved.

They were nurturing the twins to become future leaders, but it would take years for their efforts to bear fruit. At present, they had no choice but to hope that some dramatic change would come and solve the problem.

“All right, since we’ve already touched on magic, why don’t we hear about how things are going on the research front next?” Atou said, leading the meeting to the next agenda.

“My turn then,” Elder Moltar responded. “We’ve just finished researching Military Magic, which has made it possible for our forces to use military-level spells. I’m presently the only one capable of using it, but...powerful attack spells using the Ruin Mana supplied by the Palace have been unlocked! Although I don’t see us actively making use of it given His Majesty’s policies.”

“Right you are. Ruin Magic is wonderfully useful but doesn’t serve much of a purpose in Domestic Affairs...” Atou said, trailing off.

The Magic Technology known as Military Magic could already be used in battle thanks to Elder Moltar’s research. The timely completion—or rather, completely calculated timing of its completion—gave Mynoghra a powerful military card it could play when necessary.

To make things even better, they could produce Magic units once they built the Magic Research Institute. They could expect even greater military might once that became a reality.

That being said, Atou was right for languishing over its completion because Ruin Magic was only useful for offense, lessening its value to an empire like Mynoghra, which emphasized domestic growth over conquest...

“As for what to research next, let’s go with the Six Major Elements under the Magic Technology skill tree as we planned from the start. It will take some time to complete, but there’s not much merit in selecting anything else to research...”

Science Technology skills such as Smelting and Fortress Building didn’t have

much to offer Mynoghra in its current state. Both Takuto and Atou found researching skills from the Magic Technology tree to be far more appealing, too. Mynoghra would become a magic-focused nation, but specializing in one technology tree was an orthodox empire-management strategy, so they saw no issue with it.

“Let’s end the meeting with the military report,” Atou said.

“I’ll be reporting on that matter as the Warrior Captain,” Gia responded. “Our newly spawned troops consist of five Long-legged Bugs. They are scouting the Unchartered Territory around the Accursed Lands. However, unlike the Accursed Lands, the area outside the forest is all flat terrain. We can’t investigate as much as we like while prioritizing stealth.”

“Hmm,” Atou hummed thoughtfully, tapping her finger against her chin. “Information on the surrounding area is being reported to the King in detail. It’s a little risky to extend our scouting too far if we want to maintain our anonymity. Please redirect the Long-Legged Bugs to patrol around our territory.”

“It will be done... On another note, I know it is not my place to speak on research, but I’d like to propose we learn this Advanced Hunting skill you told us about before. If we acquire this skill, the Long-Legged Bugs can evolve into Headhunting Bugs, securing a more powerful military for us...”

Takuto and Atou inwardly groaned over Gia’s proposal.

He was rehashing a topic long after they had already made their decision. He presented his proposal at the worst possible time, but its contents were worth considering, and this also served as proof that free thought was growing among Takuto’s vassals.

In fact, Advanced Hunting was brought up as a research candidate before the meeting. Under normal gameplay circumstances, it would’ve been the obvious next choice.

So, why didn’t they pick it? The reason was simple: no animals existed in their forest to hunt. Gia’s inability to take that into consideration proved he still had a long way to go.

“It’s a tempting proposal, but we’re going to focus on magic research for the time being. We have an urgent need to comprehensively enhance magic-related technology,” Atou rejected his idea but made a note to lay into him with some scolding and a lot of praise later. “What is Isla’s production status?”

“Allow me to report on that,” Elder Moltar chimed in. “We have already secured sufficient Lumber and Food resources. The Flesh Trees and the highly nutritious fruits produced by His Majesty have brought good results. However, we are a little behind schedule in accumulating Magic Power and Mana.”

“Do you have anything to add, King Takuto?”

All reports and policy decisions had been made, leaving only the question of whether the contents of the meeting pleased the King.

Takuto was impressed by how smoothly everything had proceeded.

He’d explained the general process and plan to Atou, but everything moved forward through the consultation of his vassals. The sight of them being loyal to the empire and trying to fulfill their responsibilities to the best of their ability brought him joy.

“It all sounds good to me. You’re all doing a great job!”

Every one of his vassals deeply bowed their heads in response to his unusually long remark. His citizens understood the King didn’t talk much. Thus, they could feel the weight of his words when he did speak.

As they were filled with the joy that sprung up in their hearts, the meeting moved into more serious topics.



BEFORE long, the time for Domestic Affairs had ended, and it became time to raise the agenda relating to a reality none of them wanted to acknowledge. In other words, they had to face the problems with no easy solutions.

“With everything else settled, let’s talk about foreign affairs. The Holy Kingdom of Qualia hasn’t made its move yet, correct?”

“We haven’t seen any suspicious movements from them yet, no. They still seem to have their hands full with trouble to the North.”

Atou had asked Gia to confirm what she'd already assumed, and his answer did just that.

"That's a blessing in disguise for us. If we continue at this pace, even with some delays, we should complete Isla without issue. Things are currently peaceful with our potential enemy empires, which means we can focus on the problem of population growth. Does anyone have any suggestions on how to improve the situation?"

"We believe our clansmen safely escaped somewhere. Welcoming them into the empire might alleviate some of the King's concerns," Elder Moltar suggested. "If you leave persuading them to me, our clansmen are sure to bow before the greatness and mercy of our king."

"His Majesty is deeply sympathetic to the Dark Elf plight. You can rest assured that he will not abandon them. How many of your clansmen do you expect to be out there still?"

"Not many. Probably around one to two thousand now..."

"Hmm, I see... Even if we make them our citizens, we're still far from the numbers we need. King Takuto, please regale us with some wisdom on this matter."

The decision-making was handed over to Takuto.

Their original plan was to have at least five thousand citizens before too long. They could improve their overwhelming lack of intellectuals and further expand the empire's scope and scale with that many.

But there were even fewer Dark Elves than expected. Plus, while Elder Moltar refused to admit it, there was no guarantee everyone had survived.

Takuto's strategy of accepting the weak Dark Elf refugees and indebting them to him had worked better than expected. Unfortunately, he wasn't lucky enough to catch lightning in a bottle twice.

"Leave it for later."

That was all Takuto had said after rubbing his chin when Atou drew him into the conversation while he was explaining something to the twins. Even with his

experience and wisdom, this was a difficult problem to solve.

In all actuality, their situation was what was abnormal. After all, a normal game session took place over decades and centuries. It was a given that the population would naturally increase over so much in-game time.

They were asking the impossible, trying to find a way to unnaturally multiply their population just because they were short on manpower.

“There’s no easy solution, is there? You guys need to start pumping out babies!!”

An empire’s power is directly linked to its population levels. Atou narrowed her eyes on Elder Moltar and Gia and took out her grievances on them. It was frustrating that their biggest holdback didn’t have a quick fix.

But the cruelty of reality was thrown back in her face.

“Lady Atou, neither of them...are married,” Emle pointed out, dashing any hopes of children coming from their top council members.

“I’m married to my work,” both men proudly proclaimed, smacking their chests with their fists.

Emle let out an exasperated sigh.

Ha. So they’re the type who celebrates their bachelorhood. People who’ll never marry.

Immediately determining they were a lost cause, Atou gave up on the men and turned to Emle as her last hope.

“I see. Then the job falls to you, Emle...”

“I’m, um, currently searching for a partner...”

“.....”

They’re all a lost cause, Atou bitterly concluded.

Emle seemed like the type that’d be popular with the guys, but given her current role in the empire, a relationship would be challenging to balance.

Regretting ever touching on the topic of the Dark Elves’ love lives, Atou hastily changed the topic.

“L-Let’s stop talking about this! We’ve gone off track! Next! Onto the next matter of business! Let’s decide what policy to take with the neutral empire of Phon’kaven! That’s our main objective for today’s meeting!”

The tension that had temporarily loosened in the room tightened once more.

It could be said that the urgent matter of how to deal with the town right outside the Accursed Lands would determine their destiny. One wrong step could lead to an all-out war. They had to avoid that outcome at all costs, especially now when too many unknowns surrounded the neutral empire.

“I will report on that matter,” Gia spoke up. As the warrior captain, he was in charge of all military affairs. “It appears that town is currently on high alert.”

Everyone present frowned when they realized the gravity of his report.

“They are in a state of high alert? Does that mean we’ve been exposed?” Atou asked.

“No. I have confirmed sporadic Goblin attacks from a distance. They’re apparently on guard against Barbarians consisting of hostile Demi-humans.”

Barbarian is the general term used to refer to enemies not belonging to any empire. In *Eternal Nations*, they’re a nuisance that shows up in droves during early-game. From what Elder Moltar had explained about them, Atou concluded they were a similar annoyance in this world too.

They aren’t too difficult to defeat, but weaker units such as Scouts will go down without much of a fight if attacked. An army needs to be formed to deal with them. Barbarians tend to appear out of nowhere, and if left unchecked, cause significant damage to poorly defended villages and settlements.

They’re a source of irritation in many ways.

But there are some Barbarians with special skills, and the best part about killing one is that it won’t earn the wrath of another empire.

I’ll just annihilate them if the opportunity presents itself, Atou schemed.

Defeating a wide variety of units would increase her power. She had to become strong no matter what; because that was the mission she’d imposed upon herself.

“But,” Gia continued, “they seemed to be having an extremely difficult time fending them off, to the point it was even making my blood run cold.”

“Oh?” Atou cocked her head, perplexed by that bit of information.

Gia had reported the attackers were Goblins. If that was true, then they should be easy to defeat, given this world’s technological level.

The implausible situation bothered Atou.

“Is Phon’kaven not sending reinforcements?”

“Not from what I can tell. They might not be able to readily deploy reinforcements to such a distant territory. Or...I reckon their capital is under similar attack.”

“Hmm...we can’t dismiss the difficulty of sending reinforcements to a faraway settlement. Are the Barbarians in these parts that dangerous?” Atou asked.

“There are a relatively large number of Demi-humans because this is an Uncharted Territory. You often hear about Goblins, Orcs, and Kobolds attacking people.”

“But it’s hard to imagine Barbarians attacking a city, Elder Moltar. It’s one thing if they run into troops on patrol, but even they know how reckless it is to raid a city.”

Gia and Elder Moltar commenced their usual bickering. However, they weren’t coming to a very constructive conclusion, and the only thing made clear by it was that no one really knew much about the situation.

“We don’t have enough information to draw conclusions yet,” Atou interjected into their exchange. “More importantly, Barbarian attacks increase the likelihood of refugees. We might be able to increase our population if we can succeed in inviting them into our empire.”

Not every village and town belonging to an empire has adequate defenses. A city of a certain size can prevent enemy invasion with a solid stone wall, but villages devoted to agriculture and raising stock tend to be defenseless.

It was the natural course of things for the town to fall if they couldn’t eradicate the Barbarian threat, and even if they were fortunate enough to

escape, they would become refugees with nowhere else to go.

Most empires couldn't afford to take in a lot of refugees, but luckily, Mynoghra had plenty of land, food, and work for them. As long as they could accept becoming evil, then all that was left was for them to come to terms with their choice.

This idea, which was explained to the others by Atou with a smug look, was something Takuto had secretly shared with her.

"Lady Atou, isn't there a chance those refugees will betray us?"

"We just have to keep them under surveillance. You can prevent rebellions by stationing troops in the city. One of Mynoghra's units—one of King Takuto's yet-to-be-summoned subordinates—is perfect for that job."

"Ooh! Now that sounds promising!"

Atou deliberately refrained from commenting on that unit's peculiar looks. It was just barely tolerable for her. Of course, she had no way of knowing if the Dark Elves shared her sensibilities.

Either way, their abilities were guaranteed, so she and Takuto had already discussed spawning them in the near future.

"Besides, not many people would consider betraying an empire that promises them peace and safety. Am I wrong?"

"I reckon you're onto something there."

"At any rate, we would like to make contact with that empire and proceed with amicable talks soon. If we can make them feel indebted to us, great. If they're hostile, then we can cross that bridge when we get to it. I'd love to get our hands on that town if all the right cards line up, but let's try not to get our hopes up."

Everyone nodded in agreement with Atou and showed their support for the policies. That marked the end of the meeting.

"Then it's settled. During our next turn—oops, I mean, our next action is to send a messenger to the neutral empire of Phon'kaven. There's no hurry, so please think of ways to make our contact as friendly as possible."

Atou purposefully didn't touch on it, but there was a very simple reason why she—and Takuto—were fixated on this particular town.

There was a Dragon Vein Mine there.

They had to do whatever it took to obtain the Dragon Vein Mine, a Mana-producing map resource. They hoped to guide things in a friendly direction, but there were many ways to go about it.

Takuto selected an unusually assertive policy.

Mynoghra was only steps away from finally being recognized as an empire for the first time.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

The Facility to be constructed and the Technology and Units to be researched have been selected.

Under Construction: <<Clinic>>

Researching: <<Six Major Elements>>

Spawning: <<Isla, Queen of Bugs>>

OK

Chapter 3: Encounter

PHON'KAVEN is a multiracial empire with a large Human population and unique customs. It's uncertain when the empire was established, but it has the second-largest territory among the nations scattered about Idoragya's southern landmass, commonly known as the Dark Continent.

Their civilization level is about one whole step behind the empires on the northern landmass, putting them at the rudimentary empire-management level of just starting to produce iron products. One of their distinguishing features is their worship of indigenous Ancestral Spirits, which is not to be confused with the Elementals worshipped by the Elves.

Phon'kaven worships the Spirits belonging to all things in nature, such as animals, insects, trees, plants, rocks, and even the very earth beneath their feet. They also practice divination using bones and animal skins.

Although their civilization level was behind the times, Phon'kaven enjoyed gradual prosperity without any conflicts despite the fact it was a multiracial empire, probably because of the idyllic atmosphere that spread throughout their territory.

Until now...

"Hill Giant! A Hill Giant has appeared!"

Crescent Moon, Phon'kaven's capital, suffered substantial damage from daily Demi-human attacks. They had lived so long without knowing war. While they possessed a certain level of strength, their lack of experience kept them from being strong.

Their weapons were also crudely put together at the last second.

The outer walls were made of mud with little thought going into keeping out possible invasions, and the inner city consisted of groups of fragile buildings constructed from clay and dried grass.

They were up against Demi-human races that were hostile to all civilizations, commonly known as Barbarians. Goblins, Orcs, Kobolds, and even rare and dangerous beings were attacking Crescent Moon, threatening their right to life.

Today's raider was the most dangerous of all—a Hill Giant.

"Somebody tell the Staff Holders that another Hill Giant has appeared!"

"Send in the Archers! Don't let the Hill Giant into the city!"

These Demi-humans, tall enough to tower over Crescent Moon's houses, were ginormous humanoid monsters called Hill Giants. They had smooth, eerily inhuman-looking skin, a body of pure muscle, bloodshot, enraged eyes, and razor-sharp fangs jutting from their mouths.

Where they lacked in intelligence, they easily made up with superhuman strength. An inexperienced soldier would instantly turn into a lump of meat if struck by a Hill Giant's club.

Although not as strong as a Cyclops, considered the most powerful Giant subspecies, Hill Giants were still a force to be reckoned with.

Why did a Hill Giant stray from its territory to raid a Human city when they usually only hung around remote areas?

Of course, no one had the answer to that question, and they were forced to fight whether they wanted to or not.

"Shit!" bitterly swore a Beastman who'd been put on early-morning guard duty because of his heightened sense of smell. "The mud wall destroyed during the last attack hasn't been repaired yet! It's gonna charge right into the city!!"

The desperate volley of arrows from the Archers on the watchtower did nothing to stop the Hill Giant's forward march.

They were surprisingly close to the city.

It was difficult to predict where and when a Barbarian would attack even with the Beastmen's heightened senses because they appeared at random, which was why they struggled so hard to defend themselves.

A week had already passed since the last raid.

The mud walls destroyed by the three Hill Giants last time had yet to be repaired because of the sporadic Goblin attacks.

The Spearmen were bravely attacking to repel it, but the sheer size difference directly correlated to the difference in their strength. Dodging the Hill Giant's strikes was the best even a race proficient in physical combat could handle—stopping the monster in its tracks was beyond them.

The Hill Giant was headed straight for the gap left by the unrepaired mud wall and Crescent Moon's cityscape lying beyond it.

Just as everyone imagined the tragic future where the Hill Giant invaded the city through that gap and laid waste to their homes—

“Suck Grass Tendril Magic! How do you like that?!”

A young boy's voice rang out, followed by something sprouting out from underneath the Hill Giant's feet.

“GRUOOOOH”

“That's a Staff Holder's magic! He's here to help?!”

The Hill Giant started struggling against something until it couldn't move anymore. Then it fell face down on the ground as if it'd tripped. Victorious smiles spread across the Beastmen's faces as they saw countless tendrils of long grass spring up from the ground at the giant's feet and wrap around its humongous body like rope, holding it firmly in place.

“Be at ease, O brave Phon'kaven soldiers! Amazing stuff's about to go down now that I, one worthy of being a Staff Holder, is here!!”

“Oooh! Master Pepe!”

The boy, who appeared at the soldier's side from the gap in the mud wall, skipped his way over to the bound Hill Giant and hopped upon its back.

“*Mwahahaha!* Go me! I'm too awesome! Woohoo!”

The young boy's loud voice carried over the whole battlefield.

This boy wearing a robe that dragged on the ground, his shirt half-tucked into

his shorts, was the Staff Holder the soldiers had been waiting for.

Shamans managed all religious rituals and performed Miracles in Phon’kaven. Staff Holders were the highest-ranked Shamans, making them the absolute authority and leaders.

All twelve of the Staff Holders were beloved by the Beast and Earth Spirits and could work Miracles using their powers. They possessed powerful magic they could unleash at will and always carried a staff with religious significance only they were allowed to wield.

The people called them Staff Holders out of respect and ardor.

Pepe was the youngest and most promising among their ranks. He was the first to rush to the aid of the struggling soldiers, brilliantly defeating the Hill Giant.

Morale skyrocketed among the soldiers with his inspiring victory and cry of triumph. Before long, enthusiastic cheers rose up from the crowd that had formed around Pepe, who was singing his own praises on top of the Hill Giant.

“Shaman! Shaman!”

“Yaaaaay! I can’t hear you!”

Unfortunately, there was still an elephant in the room, so to speak. Every soldier had forgotten a critical piece of information—that all the other Staff Holders had dubbed the boy “Pepe the Fool.”

“GRUOOOOOOOH!!!”

“GEEEEEEEEEEH!!”

“SHAMAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!!”

The Hill Giant, whose mobility had been sealed by the Grass Tendrils, tore off its restraints.

Pepe was bucked off its back. He was paying the price for cockily not delivering the finishing blow.

The Hill Giant’s big, bloodshot eyes locked on to Pepe rolling backward on the ground, and it moved to squash the tiny boy underfoot.

That's when the true reinforcements finally arrived.

"Quagmire Magic!"

"GRAH? GRUOOOH..."

The timing was perfect.

The spell activated at the speed of light.

The second the Hill Giant brought its foot up, the quagmire that suddenly formed under its pivot leg caused it to once again taste the coldness of the hard ground.

"Grass Tendril Magic!"

It was further restrained by grass tendrils. The second Staff Holder wasn't so foolish as to let this chance to deal the death blow go to waste.

"What're you standing around for?! Now's your chance! Aim for the eyes!!"

"Y-Yes, sir!!"

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!"

It let out a single death cry.

The arrows and spears aimed at its weak point, the eyeball, undeniably pierced the ginormous monster's brain, bringing its life to an end.

The soldiers looked to the newly arrived Staff Holder, who briskly walked toward them, looking mighty displeased.

This person who had a reputation for being stern and unsparing on a daily basis was an old Beastwoman with a cow's head. She assessed the Hill Giant's state from a distance. Once she had a quick-footed, young soldier confirm it was indeed dead, she announced this raid was finally over and praised the soldiers for their hard work.

Although it goes without saying that it wasn't really the end for them, not with injured troops to treat and arrows to recover. There was a lot of other work to be done as well, such as disposing of the Hill Giant's massive corpse.

And the old woman with a cow's head, who was also the biggest contributor to this battle's success, had another important job only she could take on. That

is to say, lecturing the foolish and impulsive young Staff Holder.

“UGYU!”

“What a sorry state you’re in, Pepe! You’re an embarrassment to your role!”

“Hmmm?! Oh! It’s you, Granny Tonukapoli!”

It wasn’t until Pepe’s head was whacked by an old, natural wood staff that he finally realized he’d been knocked off the Hill Giant and lost consciousness from the blow he took.

His newly cleared vision was filled with the sight of his fellow Staff Holder, the woman who’d been his master and teacher since he was little. Her scathing words made it clear that he was in for a merciless scolding. But a friendly smile lit his face as if he believed he had nothing at all to do with his mistakes.

“You did a good job binding the Hill Giant with Grass Tendril Magic. But what in the Spirits got into you after that? Why did you let an unconfirmed victory go to your head?! I always tell you to aim for the Giants’ weak spot and finish them off fast because their superhuman strength can turn the tides of battle on you!”

“You do...? AAAAHHHH! Y-You’re right! I totally forgot— *OWWIE!*”

“You fool! It’s all over if you die! Why do you always forget the most important things?!”

He received a second whack to the head, this one forming a big bump.

Tonukapoli was frustrated by this boy who didn’t get it no matter how many times she drilled it into his little head. She’d known him since he was a baby. He was like a grandchild to her, so of course she loved him, but she was more exasperated with him than anything else.

Pepe was an undisputed idiot. He was about the only person in all of Phon’kaven who wouldn’t acknowledge it, which went to show just how much of a headache all the problems this troublesome youth brought to Tonukapoli.

“Aww, but Granny—”

“Stop calling me Granny! You’re a Staff Holder Shaman now, too! You’ll be pathetic forever if you keep this up!”

“Aww...buuuut...”

“Besides, I’m still a young and energetic 240-year-old!!”

“Living that long makes you a super old granny—”

That last remark earned Pepe his third head-whack of the day.



AFTER finishing off the Hill Giant, Tonukapoli and Pepe came to a thatched building in the middle of the city to summarize what had happened to the other Staff Holders. The building seemed more like an old ceremonial hall than a residence or government facility.

In this quiet place lit only by candlelight, several elders thanked Tonukapoli and Pepe for their hard work.

“You did wellll. Ahh, I’m so sorry, Tonukapoli, Pepeeee. If only we were a little younger, we could fight alongside youuuu...”

“Don’t sweat it! You guys are gonna kick the bucket soon, so you shouldn’t overdo it! Want me to massage your shoulders?”

No manners, loud, as rude as they come, and a terrible massager—Pepe the Fool’s true character was on full display. This boy was indeed one of the Staff Holders revered throughout the country. Every elder was exasperated with him and his remarkable talent for bluntly saying whatever was on his mind without respecting hierarchy.

“This boy’s still lacking in so many areassss... Oooi, Tonukapoli, what happened to your lessonssss?”

“HRUMPH! Even I’m struggling to teach this dimwit!”

“Buuut, he’s the successor we’ve been waiting forrrrr. No one else had what it takes to become a Staff Holderrrr...”

Being a Staff Holder symbolized more than just a position in Phon’kaven. People who could hear the voices of Nature Spirits, their gods, were incredibly rare and invaluable.

The fact that the elders hadn’t retired from their positions as Staff Holders

despite their old age was proof that no successors had appeared for a long time. Hence, they were overcome with unexpected joy when Pepe, a boy touted as a matchless genius because of that talent, appeared.

However, it seemed his genius went so far over the line, it descended into idiocy...

“HMPH! Our country is as unlucky as they come!!”

“I agreeee...”

“Ehehe! You’re all so good at joking around!”

“We’re being serious, Pepe!”

Everything seemed to go over his head.

Sure, he was talented, but it was his fatal case of having straw for brains that worried the other Staff Holders. Unfortunately, Phon’kaven was in no position to be picky about such things in their current situation.

One wrong move and lives would’ve been lost during the Hill Giant’s raid, which was why they stopped talking about Pepe to move on to more important topics.

“We’re sending you to Dragontaaaan,” one of the elderly Staff Holder’s told Tonukapoli, his cloudy eyes that could barely see opening wide to focus on her.

“Oh? You’re finally getting off your lazy asses to send help? And here I thought you were happily letting them die off after how many times you ignored their calls for reinforcements.”

“Don’t be a smartass, Tonukapoli. We’re barely keeping ourselves aliveeee...”

Dragontan was the town they had built close to the Accursed Lands. The Staff Holders had worried about its lack of defenses for a long time, but their hands were full defending the closer towns. Dragontan had been able to hold out this long because the Barbarian attacks were relatively weaker there, but it seemed they were in dire straits now.

“HRUMPH! This is what you get for greedily claiming the Dragon Vein Mine!” Tonukapoli huffed, but even she understood the Dragon Vein Mine’s

importance.

They were currently researching Tactical Magic. Once they finally completed the resulting technology, it should make it possible for them to refine the powerful Earth Mana that fertilized their empire from the Dragon Vein Mine. That was why they had forced through the construction of a town in such a faraway land.

But now, their decision had placed their countrymen in a pinch.

“What’re you going to do about things here? All our towns are barely keeping themselves alive; it’s too much to ask them for reinforcements.”

“Us old-timers will manageeee. We’re Staff Holders, even if we don’t look the partttt.”

“That sounds like something you say before you die in battle! Owwie!!”

A clean whack echoed through the hall.

Was Pepe becoming more of a fool by the elders constantly whacking him on the head? The thought crossed everyone’s minds, but they turned their attention to more important things.

They had already decided on their next move, but telling the boy and the old woman about it was distressing.

“We’ve got an additional favor to ask of you while you’re in the areaaaa...”

“...What is it? Spit it out already. You’re making me uncomfortable.”

Tonukapoli worried her brow over the way the elders were beating around the bush. They were dragging things out even though they knew she preferred to cut to the chase. She waited for the rest, bracing for whatever ridiculous task they were going to push on her.

“According to our divination, there’s an Apocalypse-bringer in the Accursed Lands. Please look into it with Pepeeee...”

Understanding exactly what that meant, Tonukapoli squeezed her eyes shut, sucked in a big breath, and slowly exhaled.

Tonukapoli and Pepe were the first and second strongest in all of Phon’kaven.

It'd normally be a nation-ending foolish decision to remove your two most powerful military assets from defending the capital city. It was even more ridiculous to risk sending such invaluable assets into the entirely unknown Accursed Lands.

But if the source of the Barbarian attacks lay within the Accursed Lands, and if the two Staff Holders could stop it there, then the problems plaguing Phon'kaven could be solved in one go.

The safest decision would be to take their time gathering information on the Accursed Lands. Sadly, time wasn't on their side.

The risk was high, and it was unclear if it had anything to do with the Barbarians. If that wasn't bad enough, there was no guarantee they would make it back alive.

In other words, Phon'kaven was betting it all on this one decision.

"So you want us to round up the ringleaders behind the Barbarian attacks if we bump into them? Sounds like we've got the deadlier job here, eh?"

"Sorry for leaving the ill-omened work to youuuu."

"Well, it's not like it's guaranteed to be worse! I'll be praying the Beast and Land gods protect us!"

The journey there wouldn't be hard, but their destination was a cruel one.

They didn't have to rope Pepe into this too, Tonukapoli thought, barely stopping herself from making her unusual complaint known.

Both she and Pepe were Staff Holders. With power and authority comes responsibility. Now was simply the time for him to fulfill his responsibilities.

"Safe travels, Tonukapoli," one of the elders said.

"Don't ya go dying on me either, you old goat!" Tonukapoli retorted with her usual gumption.

She had no intention of dying either. In fact, she was keen on completing her mission so perfectly, the elders would be indebted to her for life.

"I'll get ready at once! My staff is itching to be put to use!"

“Have a safe trip, Granny Tonukapoli!”

“Somebody wasn’t listening again! You’re coming too, little idiot!”

“Owwiieee!”



THAT somewhat idyllic exchange transpired over a week ago, and now Tonukapoli bitterly regretted the decision she made that day.

They often say a foolish child is more precious.

Tonukapoli felt that way about Pepe.

She was prepared for a dangerous mission but not prepared enough. She never expected she was up against certain death.

Perhaps she had too much confidence in her own strength. She went into this mission optimistic that the worst they could expect was slight losses to their accompanying guard detail.

It went without saying that the idyllic nature of Phon’kaven’s people worked against them during this expedition.

For on this day, Phon’kaven made first contact with Mynoghra.

“Dark Elves? But their ominous aura says otherwise...”

“Oh? And who might you be...?”

Dragontan was the town constructed around the Dragon Vein Mine.

After taking a short break in town, Tonukapoli had confided the despairing news to the mayor, who was pleased with what she thought was reinforcements, and then they set out for the Accursed Lands, where they encountered the Dark Elves straightaway.

They were up against a girl with an ominous aura and the Dark Elf warriors accompanying her. Unlike the people living to the north, the multiracial empire of Phon’kaven didn’t discriminate against Dark Elves.

But it was questionable if these were even the Dark Elves they knew of...

The group before them was clad in such thick darkness, it was noticeable at a

glance. Especially the girl leading them. Her aura was so dark it could blot out the sun.

Tonukapoli's instincts set off every alarm, warning her that the Hill Giants she'd faced before were like defenseless infants compared to this entity.

One glance at the Accursed Lands towering behind the girl's group informed the cow-headed Shaman that things were already too much for her to handle. Whatever resided there seemed to be concealing it well, but once you became as skilled as Tonukapoli, it was clear as day that the Accursed Lands had been polluted by evil forces.

A profound and terrifying evil had come from the forest to greet them.

"You aren't mortal..."

"...Right you are," the girl quietly answered Tonukapoli's question.

Her words alone chilled Phon'kaven's expeditionary forces to the bone. Her dulcet voice couldn't hide the terrifying truth contained within her remark.

"L-Lady Tonukapoli! Wh-What are they?!"

"That's what I'd like to know! Don't draw your weapons or make any sudden moves, you hear me?!" Tonukapoli hastily ordered the soldiers.

Bringing an elite unit consisting of only Beastmen, known as the Fang Corps, had been a bad move. They were incapable of using rudimentary magic and communicating with Nature Spirits, but their animal instincts detected the immense evil, throwing them into a state of dismay.

Everyone was terrified of the dark aura and on the verge of acting recklessly based solely on what their instincts told them.

Word had it that the dark ones hated everyone and wanted to extinguish all life. Living creatures also all had an instinctive repulsion toward dark beings.

It was still unknown if they were the ones instigating the Barbarians.

Their strength was also unknown.

But Tonukapoli's instincts screamed at her: you shouldn't fight. These aren't enemies you can defeat. Run. *Now*.

As time painfully ticked by, Tonukapoli racked her brain for a way out.

“Gia, order everyone to standby until I say otherwise.”

“As you command.”

Atou was also quietly giving Gia orders.

As a general rule, Atou didn’t trust anything outside of Mynoghra. It didn’t help that this encounter resembled the one they had with the Holy Kingdom of Qualia’s reconnaissance team.

The inevitable outcome was clear, but King Takuto had sent them out on a different mission this time. They had several strategies for visiting the nearby town, but they didn’t plan to encounter their forces first.

Not only could Atou not report the operation’s failure to Takuto, but she’d screwed up by dedicating too much of her attention to playing out how the conversation in Dragontan might go. She was so focused, she became less aware of her surroundings.

She wanted to defuse the tension, but her opponents—the Beastmen Soldiers in particular—were extremely wary. She might cause the whole situation to explode if she made the wrong move now.

She wanted to avoid that at all costs.

Atou and the Dark Elves were tense as well.

Tension has a way of begetting more tension, restraining everyone’s actions out of fear of an undesirable future.

Anxiety that even speaking a single word could lead to irrevocable harm made both sides hesitant to move a finger.

It was at this time when the tension reached its limit and battle seemed inevitable that—

“May I have everybody’s attention?!”

—a voice rang out with as little reserve as someone purposely jumping on thin ice.

All eyes gathered on one person—the figure that had jumped out in front of

Atou and the Dark Elves with his right hand raised like a child trying to ask a question. Probably the shortest person present, he broke out in a big grin as if moving into the limelight delighted him.

...It goes without saying the person in question was Pepe the Fool.

Even Tonukapoli, his overseer, gaped at his crazy behavior.

Everyone's brains eventually caught up with the abrupt change in the situation, and a second before either side could process how to deal with him—

“Hello! My name is Pepe! What's yours?!”

—a cheerful greeting emitted by a boy who couldn't read the mood shattered their responses.



Pepe the Fool

Commander

~Because he's a fool, he doesn't discriminate; because he's a fool, he doesn't know fear; and because he's a fool, he can get along with anyone. We could all stand to learn something from him.~

Distinct Features

<<Amity>>

Impression of all Commanders + 2 points

Positive impression rate given to all Commanders + 50%

<<Egalitarian>>

Impression doesn't change based on Race or Alignment

<<Trader >>

Total profit obtained from trade + 20%

The two hostile groups that had been staring each other down, ready for a fight only minutes prior, now had trouble finding the right words to say for an entirely different reason that had nothing to do with the earlier tension.

Mynoghra and Phon'kaven's elite troops were presently walking together down the unmarked path through the Accursed Lands. They had but one destination: Mynoghra's Imperial Capital.

Atou and the Dark Elves led the way for Phon'kaven's commanders, who'd requested an audience with Takuto. Still, their expressions were less than appropriate for this critical mission that would influence the future of their empire.

"And then that's when I said: 'Nefarious scoundrels who dare to lay ruin to Phon'kaven, have a taste of my magic!' I said it just like that! Are you listening, Miss Atou?!"

"Yes, I heard you loud and clear."

"Boy, oh boy, those Demi-humans really make me work! I just know Phon'kaven would be a pile of rubble by now if I wasn't around! No question about it!"

Atou frowned as she was made to listen to the boy's innocently embellished tales of his own heroic deeds. She wasn't particularly disgusted by it, but his incessant prattling was wearing her down.

"I-I see... You must have it rough," Atou responded politely. "Uncivilized Barbarians occasionally attack people who are just trying to live in peace. They are a nuisance that only brings harm, never any benefit."

"You can say that again! You are so, so right, Miss Atou! Wow! Like, wow! I'm thrilled you get me! It feels like we've always been good friends! Wahaha!" Pepe brayed with laughter.

Thanks to this spirited and wacky boy's greeting, the two armed forces were able to finally take their tense encounter in a peaceful direction. Pepe had done a marvelous job of mediating the volatile situation, but everyone's estimation of him was on a steady decline after that. If anything, both sides were growing rapidly more exasperated with him.

He'd been acting like this ever since he first interjected himself into the negotiations. No one asked him to blab on and on about himself, but he did it anyway.

"Pardon me, Lady Tonukapoli, but why is this child sticking so close to me...?"

"Please ignore him, Lady Atou. That child is a *fool*."

"*Haa*," Atou sighed aloud, which was an unusual public display of irritation on her part. That was how much she was struggling to get a feel for the boy named Pepe. Something about him threw her entirely off her game. "That makes sense..."

They were still in the preliminary stages of negotiation, which required a delicate hand, and yet there was this oddly relaxed atmosphere between them, as if they were a group of friends enjoying a hike on a peaceful, sunny afternoon.

Atou knew the cause—it was all the doing of the boy with a wily personality, who seemed more than just incapable of reading the mood. She was starting to suspect he had some unique skill to defuse tension and calm the room.

Whether he did or not, it didn't do anything to make the situation worse. However strangely it had happened, they avoided going to battle. She didn't know where things would go from there, but the current situation was working out well for her side too. Thus, Atou forcefully convinced herself that the world was full of all sorts of personalities, and she shouldn't kill him just because he got under her skin.

"I must say, the miasma is dense here," Tonukapoli commented. "It's even starting to get to me."

"I apologize, but that's not something we can fix, Lady Tonukapoli," Atou said. "It is a part of our people... But please feel free to let me know if it is too much for you. We are more than happy to hold this meeting in a different location on another day."

Atou actually wanted to hold off the meeting between Commanders until both sides could feel each other out a little better, but the other empire requested an urgent audience with Takuto. She was momentarily concerned

they were scheming something, but Takuto had telepathically persuaded her otherwise.

His thought on the matter was that they were probably seeking urgent aid or information about the Barbarians attacking their towns, which made sense to her too. Mynoghra's empire-management council had already confirmed Dragontan was in a state of impending doom.

There was no telling if Phon'kaven wanted supplies or something else, but the one clear thing was that they couldn't afford to make an enemy of Mynoghra right now. And just as Takuto had predicted, Tonukapoli couldn't fully conceal her urgency.

"Nah, as they say, never put off till tomorrow what you can do today," Tonukapoli said. "Well, it was a bit much on my soldiers, so I left most of them outside the forest. But hey, we're the ones who pushed for this meeting. It's only right for us to suck it up and see it through."

"Thank you for being considerate of us. Our king sincerely welcomes you."

Did her desperation bleed through because they were that hard-pressed or because she simply didn't know how to deceive others? Either way, any action against Mynoghra would be in vain. The moment their Commanders stepped foot within Mynoghra's territory, they were put at a massive disadvantage.

Atou's strength had already risen to the point where her mere presence would put a decisive end to any battle. In the off-chance that they did have some evil plot in mind, Atou was confident she could pulverize them in a head-on battle now.

"I'm kinda hungry now!" Pepe proclaimed. "Maybe it's just me, but my legs feel like lead!"

"Um, Lady Tonukapoli? Will *he* be all right?" Atou asked.

Most of Tonukapoli's troops were waiting outside of the Accursed Lands because the miasma made them sick. Only the strongest mustered their willpower to accompany their Commanders, but even they looked ill. The same held true of those capable of competing with the Dark Elf Warriors on equal footing. So, it was bizarre that this little boy was well enough to cheerily blather

about inconsequential things.

“He’s too much of a fool to notice.”

Judging by that remark, even his fellow Staff Holder and teacher didn’t know why he was okay.

Pepe proceeded down the pathless trail with a hop in his step. Swinging a branch he’d scooped up off the ground, he chatted up every Dark Elf he saw like he was having the time of his life.

Atou wanted to rein in any excess talking, but she didn’t want to offend an official state guest.

Sympathizing with the troubled Dark Elves, Tonukapoli asked them to put up with the Fool’s antics just a little longer and returned her attention to Atou.

“On another note, would you be willing to tell me a bit about Mynoghra’s King, Lady Atou? I’d hate to offend him over cultural differences.”

“Yes! I’d love to! Allow me to begin by explaining His Majesty’s greatness, coolness, kindness, and awesomeness!”

Atou’s expression, which had occasionally grown pensive during their walk, instantly lit up like a candle. That change alone was enough to inform Tonukapoli how much she respected and adored her king.

This girl, who enthusiastically regaled Tonukapoli with tales of her king’s wonderfulness, was by all estimations...an unfathomable *monster*. She concealed unparalleled power within her cute, petite frame.

A monster found only in legends and myths—what kind of king would such a being lovingly serve?

As the miasma grew thicker, chilling anxiety flooded Tonukapoli.

All right, what in the Spirit realm is waiting for us...?

Tonukapoli’s thoughts went straight to the legends about the King of Ruin, who was said to have been sealed in the Accursed Lands.

Did we make the right decision? We’ve come this far because we got swept up in Pepe’s antics, but I can’t shake the feeling this is a big mistake.

The old lady shook her cow's head to chase away the apprehension bubbling in her gut.



STANDING before that being, the old woman named Tonukapoli was made aware of just how small and fleeting her existence was. She was like a blade of grass before a tornado. The entity sitting upon the throne in the Throne Room gave off an aura that separated it from all living things in this world and impressed the deepest darkness upon her soul—the kind that threatened to swallow her whole.

Something straight out of a nightmare just moved in next door...

At first glance, it appeared Human. But it looked like some child had painted over its form with black ink, and it incited the instinctual fear that just touching it would rip your mind to shreds.

This was the King revered by the girl Atou.

A true monster revered by other monsters.

Tonukapoli forgot to breathe before this being that surpassed her knowledge, imagination, and expectations and instead focused solely on reining in her heart's desire to scream.

Darkness permeates every corner of this Palace. We can't escape this. That thing must be an Archdemon...or maybe a Demon Lord with an army. Aaugh, fine, I'll admit I'm wrong. That thing is Evil God class, no matter how you slice it.

Their eyes met in silence.

Tonukapoli was up against a being that normally resided in the world of legends and myths. That said, she wasn't going to thoughtlessly bend a knee before it.

Although he was a terrifying Evil God, he was also the leader of a country she was about to negotiate with as the representative of Phon'kaven.

They were of equal standing. Thus, Tonukapoli quietly assessed the entity, stifling her overwhelming fear while she waited for the official introductions to commence.

“This is our great and mighty king, Takuto Ira,” Atou introduced Takuto to Tonukapoli’s group first, then addressed her king. “King Takuto, they are Phon’kaven’s Commanders that I informed you of earlier, Staff Holder Tonukapoli and Pepe.”

“Fascinating.”

A hand wrapped around Tonukapoli’s heart and crushed it with ease.

No...that was just a hallucination.

Words are an ancient form of putting people under a curse.

Tonukapoli had heard that the people of old understood the power of words and did not speak at all unless absolutely necessary. In her younger days, she’d snorted at that legend and thought it nonsense, but now she’d seriously listen to and believe the former Staff Holder who taught her about the power of words.

Just a single word uttered by the King was that dangerous.

Tonukapoli wanted to turn tail and run. She wanted to pretend she never saw anything and forget all that had transpired here. Her weak heart reared its ugly head, destabilizing her disciplined mind.

Even so, she was one of the twelve Staff Holders who governed Phon’kaven. In the name of the Gods of Nature and for the pride of her nation, she spoke with authority and not fear.

“O great king, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am one of the twelve Phon’kaven Staff Holders, Scimitar-horned Tonukapoli. Thank you for—”

“How do you do?! My name is Pepe, and I’m from Phon’kaven! It’s nice to meet ya! Please be my friend!”

“NUUOOOOOOO! PEPEEEEE! YOU FOOOOOOOOOOOOL!!”

So much for coming across as authoritative. This was a picture-perfect demonstration of what it means not to be able to read the room.

Tonukapoli hurriedly clamped her hands over her mouth after her uncontrollable outburst. Sure, she was struck with admiration for the boy’s courage to casually greet the King of Mynoghra, who instilled fear in the two-

hundred-year-old woman. But she wished he held his tongue.

Assuming that Pepe would be just as paralyzed with fear as her was the greatest mistake of Tonukapoli's life.

"Friends...?"

"P-Please forgive us, King Takuto Ira! Pepe was so nervous he spoke out of turn. I'd appreciate it if you could laugh and overlook it as a youngster's oversight."

Tonukapoli tried to smooth things over before Takuto could respond. She doubted he was so narrow-minded he'd blow up over such a minor slight, but there was a good chance it lowered his estimation of them.

It was absurd for diplomatic leaders to ask each other to be friends. Doing so was apt to bring the other leader's capabilities into question, consequently damaging that nation's reputation.

What nonsense is he spewing at such a critical time?!

While barely keeping her vision and mind from blacking out, Tonukapoli regretted her negligent education turning Pepe into such an eccentric little devil. She believed she'd picked the right words to sweep his blunder under the rug, but...

"Sure. We can be friends. I like that. Let's be *good* friends."

"YAY!"

"WHAAAAAT?!"

Contrary to Tonukapoli's expectations, the King's response was truly a bolt out of the blue.

National leaders being friends? Is he serious? What is he plotting? What is he after?

Tonukapoli looked away as she ruminated over answerless questions. Her gaze landed on the King's confidant, Atou.

Tonukapoli had established a rough idea about the girl's personality during their long hike to the Palace. She had determined that although the girl was evil

by nature, her way of thinking and manners fell in line with the rest of the world.

If that were true, then she should also have misgivings about this situation. Tonukapoli actually looked to her, hoping to find the same shock she felt, but... Atou's reaction was just as weird, if not weirder.

The girl had pressed a hand against her cheek, tears filling her eyes in her excitement.



“Oooh! What a marvelous day!”

“E-Er, Lady Atou?”

“Congratulations on your first friend, King Takuto!! Come on, everyone! Applaud!”

The Dark Elves guarding the King began applauding with gusto. Atou followed suit, looking beyond delighted. The King bashfully scratched his head.

I don't get it.

Tonukapoli didn't get it, but she clapped anyway. After all, she was the only one not joining in, as Pepe was merrily slapping his hands together.

A merry mood settled over the Throne Room. All the tension instantly dispersed, leaving Tonukapoli beyond baffled over what the heck just transpired.

Th-This has turned into something outrageous, hasn't it...?

Was Mynoghra's King purposely playing along with Pepe's suggestion to alleviate the tension? Or was he mocking them?

Or perhaps he was seriously trying to befriend them.

The problem was, King Takuto Ira had no expression to go by. He simply looked like jet-black darkness pretending to be a bashful Human.

Are we just applauding and congratulating an empty void? Tonukapoli couldn't shake that chilling thought.

The only thing she knew for sure was that Mynoghra's King Takuto Ira was a being far beyond her understanding.



Dark Mage (Scimitar-horned Tonukapoli)

Magic Unit

Strength: 3 Move: 1

<<Sage>>

<<Nature Spirit Artes>>

<<Beastwoman>>

NO IMAGE

Description

~You must never anger the cow-headed Staff Holder. She is the embodiment of nature. As such, her fury is nature's fury.~

Dark Mages are experienced Magic units that have been upgraded from Mage. If they have the necessary Mana source, they can learn Tactical Spells up to Lv.2 and sway the battle to your advantage.

The downside is their minuscule strength, which requires them to be guarded by other units.

Some Mage units may acquire the <<Sage>> ability.

Chapter 4: Hospitality

TONUKAPOLI was dumbfounded...because discussions had led to a banquet being held to celebrate the new friendship between Pepe and Takuto. At first, she thought it was a part of some elaborate scheme, but the girl embodying the source of all evil seemed genuinely thrilled about their friendship, so Tonukapoli convinced herself it really was just a celebratory feast.

Food was carried out in droves to their table before long. Every dish consisted of ingredients she'd never seen or heard of before. But the aroma was heavenly, and even Tonukapoli, who usually never cared about what she put in her mouth, had to swallow back her drool.

"Please dig in!" Atou exclaimed. "It's an auspicious occasion! Go on! Have a bite. You too, Lady Tonukapoli!"

"I-I will. Thanks."

Urged to eat, Tonukapoli picked up one of the fruits first. She didn't consume meat or grains, so it was the obvious choice. The beautifully sliced fruit was a bright orange color, and she could tell it was of the finest quality from the scrumptiously sweet smell.

Tonukapoli couldn't hide her astonishment that such a sophisticated fruit existed. So she asked one of the Dark Elf girl's—an odd girl with half her face burned—serving the food about it. The girl's smile dimpled her ruddy cheeks as she explained that it was a special kind of food called "The Gift of the Sun" or "Golden Berries."

Heh. I see. It's pretty bold and daring to call it a gift from the almighty sun burning in the sky, but I can't say that naming sense is disrespectful when it's for something of this quality. Though I can't really judge it until I try it.

Tonukapoli picked up a silver fork set on the table in front of her, closely stared at the sticky, juicy fruit, and finally worked up the nerve to pop it into her

mouth.

Wh-What in the Spirit realm is this?!!

The moment she tasted it, every sweet thing she'd ever tried before was reduced to tasting worse than sand in comparison.

What a flavor! What a little treasure!

The tangy sweetness spreading over her tongue blew away her expectations. It was so soft that it fell apart just by rolling it lightly with the tip of her tongue, and juice gushed out every time she chewed. Most astonishing of all was the delectable scent transmitted from her mouth through her nasal cavity and how that alone was tantalizing enough to melt the walls she'd built up around her mind.

Delighted cries rose up all around her—cries belonging to the elite troops who'd accompanied Tonukapoli into the Accursed Lands. They were eating with such gusto they seemed to have forgotten how sick the thick miasma made them until now. She couldn't really blame them for their quick change in attitude after they had a taste of something otherworldly.

Her stomach, which should've shrunk with age, seemed to suddenly remember its more youthful days as it nagged her to give it more food. With sheer willpower, she forcefully stopped her hand as it greedily reached for the next plate...

Tonukapoli quietly analyzed the strange phenomenon she'd just experienced and scrutinized Mynoghra's leaders.

"I know this is a rude question but is this food...tainted?"

Giving Pepe a sidelong glance as he continued shoveling food into his mouth without hesitation, Tonukapoli put her question to Atou, making sure to keep her emotions off her face.

It is said that evil beings taint and corrupt people. They quietly enter every aspect of your life and ensnare the soul so that you can never escape.

Evil takes many forms to do this.

For example, a treasure that is so dazzling you won't use it your entire life.

For example, a beautiful siren of a princess who will make it so you have eyes for no other once you look upon her.

...For example, a food that you will never forget after taking a single bite.

She wasn't so feeble with age to lose her mind, but even she found that fruit to be the culmination of all that makes eating pleasurable, to the point it made her want to greedily devour it and seek out more, decorum be damned.

Thus, she asked to know what she had been fed. To make it known that such tantalizing food shouldn't be allowed to exist in this world.

But the doubts that she should've posed with tension and wariness were immediately denied by Atou, who looked a tad surprised.

"Tainted food? *Oooh!* I get it. It was so delicious you wondered if it would have some sort of negative influence over you, right? Don't worry, there's none of that," Atou reassured with a wave of her hand.

Tonukapoli was baffled by her reaction, but she wasn't going to cease her inquiry there. After all, she was faced with a table full of otherworldly, demonic food capable of seducing every living creature. This food was so valuable that even the dishes on the table could cause a conflict resulting in death depending on the situation.

Chuckling just a plate of this food into a room full of Qualia's greedy clergymen was liable to cause a laughable conflict. Tonukapoli was sure of it—that was the kind of power and sway this food had over people.

It was only natural she wouldn't be convinced of its safety until she learned of its origins.

"*Hmm,*" Atou hummed, placing a finger to her lips. "How should I explain? This food can only be grown in our empire. I cannot go into greater detail as it's a national secret, but I can guarantee it is safe for all races to consume."

Atou gave that excessive explanation out of consideration for Tonukapoli's wariness. Not even Tonukapoli could press for more details when it was explained away as a national secret.

It was unbelievably delicious, but as long as it existed upon the table, she

couldn't disregard it as an illusion.

"It's tasty."

"It's so tasty, you'll eat too much and make your bottoms burst at the seams!"

"I see, I see. That's some amazing food."

The two Dark Elf girls serving food brought additional dishes to Tonukapoli with angelic smiles. As she accepted the plates, she smiled at the innocent girls who were just like little angels despite serving the embodiment of evil.

I want to exchange our foolish Pepe for one of them...

Tonukapoli glanced sideways at Pepe, who was in the middle of sinking his teeth into some weird food consisting of meat between two pieces of bread. He'd been saying nothing but "Yummy, yummy!" the whole time, but he was always the type to call anything he ate yummy, so it was hard to say if he actually understood how unusual their food was.

Still, if Pepe could eat the food they served with confidence, then it was probably safe. Tonukapoli let out a long, relieved sigh over her fears being unfounded. Then she apologized for having ever doubted Mynoghra and praised them for preparing such a wonderful feast that it gave her such doubts. Her praise seemed to delight Atou and her people as the Dark Elf girls brought even more plates of food to Tonukapoli.

Nevertheless, Tonukapoli was struck with admiration. Being able to produce this much fruit and food indicated Mynoghra had advanced technological capabilities. Not to mention affluence.

Food was generally considered good if it was edible. This held especially true on the Dark Continent, where it was difficult to produce crops. So sparing food for lavish meals proved they had a high production capacity. Tonukapoli had asked the twins about it, and they said they normally ate this well.

This food was good enough to be served in the Imperial Palace, so she assumed it was reserved for special occasions, not something to be eaten all the time. Too curious to leave it at that, Tonukapoli further questioned the twins, who told her that while the food was special, all of Mynoghra's citizens had the

opportunity to eat it.

If that were true, then they were a tremendously blessed people.

It also served as a painful wake-up call about just how barely edible and horrible the food Tonukapoli's people had been eating all this time really was. At the same time, she also wondered how in the Spirit realm she could go back and suffer eating the food of her homeland after knowing what heaven tasted like. The single bite of fruit she'd consumed had this great of an impact on the old woman.

"All of this comes from His Majesty," Atou explained. "Every citizen has access to more food than they could ever eat. Please enjoy every bite until you are satisfied. Mynoghra prides itself on providing the most delicious food in the world."

"Yeah, it's certainly the best in the world, I'd say. I've heard a lot of different regions boast about this or that, but this is the first time the boasting doesn't do the product justice. I haven't been eating much these days, but I might have to start watching my weight if I hang out with you people..."

Tonukapoli's belly was bulging against her clothes before she realized it. She'd tried several different dishes aside from the various fruits, all of which were new to her and unlike anything she'd ever tasted before. She seemed to have eaten a considerable amount of food as she tested every dish with relish.

I can't believe I binge ate during a banquet hosted by another nation and put on weight at my age. Who knows what crass and witty remarks my fellow Staff Holders will make when I tell them.

Feeling a little self-conscious, Tonukapoli tossed a tiny purple fruit into her mouth, telling herself it would be her last bite of food for the day...but then she wanted a little more.

I'd better prepare myself to get lectured once I give my report back home, Tonukapoli thought, giving in to the temptation.

"Nobody will care if you get fat, Granny— *YEOWCH!* That hurt worse than usual!"

"Are you okay?" one of the Dark Elf twins asked.

“Your skull sounded like an empty can being hit...” the other twin said.

But she had to get retribution for Pepe’s slip of the tongue before the other Staff Holders could...

After shooting Pepe, whose eyes filled with tears after being whacked on the head with twice her usual force, an evil look, Tonukapoli shifted her gaze to Takuto Ira, the king of the empire called Mynoghra. No matter how much she looked at *it* sitting there dining with them like it was only natural, she couldn’t get used to it.

How could she?

After all, he appeared to be an Evil God. It was a miracle she could stay calm in his presence. Regardless of how she felt, they were at the point of no return.

There was an old proverb that went something like, “You can’t obtain treasure if you don’t venture into the dragon’s den.”

There was a risk they were being deceived, but forming friendly relations with Mynoghra would truly benefit their nation.

She hadn’t the faintest clue what the King was.

He was creepy, evil, and she didn’t think for one second he had a shred of mortal emotion. He sat perfectly still on his chair, emitting unfathomable terror as easily as breathing air.

What was the King thinking? What was he trying to do?

The only thing Tonukapoli could tell about him was that he somehow seemed to be in a good mood. Try as she might, she couldn’t fathom how in the world he was put into such a mood by Pepe’s comment.

She might not understand how it happened, but it appeared Pepe the Fool did his foolish best to aid Phon’kaven. As she rejoiced over her grandson’s growth, Tonukapoli finally started to loosen up a little.

“I know! Let’s ask them to sell this food to us! Everybody will be so happy!”

So much for his growth—he just threw a fireball into their midst as things were starting to cool down. Pepe suggested the most ridiculous thing with stars in his eyes.

There he goes stirring up trouble again...

Tonukapoli held a hand to her aching head, but the cat was already out of the bag. He had to go and toss that comment out there at the worst timing when she'd hoped to bring their biggest concerns to Mynoghra after the banquet.

Tonukapoli softly scolded Pepe as she prayed to the Nature Spirits to do something about the foolish child before he could utter any other stupid ideas that came to his little head.

"We can't very well ask them to sell such high-quality food to us. They aren't likely willing to share it with other nations. Besides, we only just formed friendly relations with them. I understand how you feel, but it's too soon for that, Pepe."

Mynoghra's food was very tempting. They should have a surplus in food supplies and production if all of their citizens sustain a diet of three good meals a day.

The food situation in Phon'kaven was grave given their current circumstances. It'd be exceedingly beneficial to their nation to acquire some food through trade, even if it wasn't of the highest quality.

But as she'd just warned Pepe, their relationship with Mynoghra wasn't even a day old yet. This wasn't something to negotiate during the early stages of their relationship.

"Sure."

"A-Are you sure you're okay with that, King Takuto Ira?!"

"Yup."

If Pepe was considered irrational by Phon'kaven's standards, then irrational WAS the standard in Mynoghra.

King Takuto Ira immediately jumped on Pepe's suggestion and went along with it as if he were brought a terrific deal.

"You never cease to amaze, King Takuto! This is a wonderful plan!"

"Let's draft up the details later!"

Any vassal in their right mind should have objected and pleaded with their king to reconsider, but they were all for it as if it were an ingenious idea.

The mystery of how they could so boldly strike a deal at a second's notice was only growing more questionable, but Tonukapoli needed this negotiation to work.

This was their chance. Tonukapoli thought of the products her country could export so she could conclude these negotiations on the best possible terms.

"All right. I can't hide my delight over this wonderful proposition either, but what does your nation want in return? Let me be clear with you: we don't have any specialty products to offer you. Not that I can think of anything in this world with equal value to food as amazing as this."

"That's a valid point... We don't need anything special. We just want consumable goods such as metal equipment, daily necessities, entertainment goods, paper, cloth, and the like. We will accept that as equal payment. We will keep the food we sell you at a reasonable price, too."

Consumable goods.

Tonukapoli furrowed her brow. What did they need any of that for?

Phon'kaven would have no problem exporting miscellaneous goods and consumables. None of that was confidential or invaluable, which begged the question of why Mynoghra needed them.

"*Hmm*, we can afford to export those items. However...I can't see what you need it for. For example, you have such beautiful tableware. It's of an unbelievable quality I have never seen before. Even the advanced nation of Qualia doesn't have anything like this. And obviously, we don't either."

Plates, bowls, cups, and candlesticks lined the long table. Looking at the eating utensils they provided, called forks and spoons, Tonukapoli questioned their need out of pure curiosity.

Atou smiled vaguely and shook her head, simply answering, "Because there is a demand for products from other countries."

Tonukapoli scrutinized her expression but couldn't understand the intentions

hidden behind her smile.

Even a cunning old Mage who'd lived for hundreds of years was no match for a creature beyond mortal understanding. After a long pause, Tonukapoli sighed and held up both hands in defeat.

It wasn't a bad deal. The farmland in Phon'kaven had been destroyed by the Barbarians. In fact, there was a real problem with their food supply, as they needed to allocate able bodies to the defense force. They couldn't have asked for a better deal than to fill their empty bellies at the price of unimportant, easily produced miscellaneous goods.

"We'll leave it at that. We don't have any issues with the terms. It's a good deal both parties can agree to."

In the end, some rough arrangements were made on the spot, which was an unexpected gain for Tonukapoli. Objectively, importing food from a nation they had just met risked potential contamination and poisoning, but she determined that problem could be solved later with food inspections.

In any case, Mynoghra's food was enticing. They were receiving a tremendous benefit with minimal effort.

Eventually, the meal came to an end, and the table was cleared. After everyone had a chance to relax with some post-meal drinks, Atou eased them into the main topic of discussion.

"All right, we didn't get the chance to speak at length about it earlier, so we would like to know what business brought you to our territory."

"Yes, of course. I'll be the one to speak on this matter. It's a tad too complicated for Pepe, after all."

It was time to get to the real issue at hand: the bizarre phenomenon plaguing Phon'kaven. If they could grasp even a fragment of understanding about what was happening, that would be satisfactory, and if they could obtain support from Mynoghra through negotiations, that would be more than they could ever ask for.

From their conversations thus far, it was doubtful for Mynoghra to be related to the sudden Barbarian outbreak. Mynoghra seemed concerned about the

Barbarians as well, and they didn't seem to have the sick hobby of enjoying sitting back and watching as they played Phon'kaven.

As far as she could tell from the terrifying girl called Atou, Mynoghra appeared to be the type that took pride in establishing and adhering to contracts. Renegading on one would hurt their lofty pride.

In which case, they should be able to work together...even if it meant joining hands with evil. And Tonukapoli and Pepe were the only ones who could make this deal happen.

It was a crucial moment.

Tonukapoli was grateful to Pepe and King Takuto Ira for making peace right off the bat. They were fortunate this wasn't a very strict and ceremonious moment. She was an amateur when it came to international negotiations. She didn't know what horrible mistakes she'd make when she was nervous. But being too relaxed was a problem in and of itself.

She downed the liquid in her glass to help her concentrate on the upcoming conversation. An unknown delicacy slid over her tongue and down her throat, but strangely, she couldn't fully enjoy the taste under these circumstances.

They were finally talking about what mattered to both parties: the purpose for which Phon'kaven came to the Accursed Lands.

Of course, Tonukapoli wasn't going to reveal everything about her true purpose for being there—their investigation into the Barbarian attacks and how to stop them. Showing all your cards is synonymous with exposing your weaknesses, putting you at a disadvantage in negotiations, even if the other party is an ally.

Thus, she reduced her explanation down to the slightly altered truth that they were investigating the Accursed Lands as a part of a preliminary investigation into the Barbarians, which they hoped would lead to an answer on how they could eliminate them at their source.

They needed to prevent Mynoghra from learning that they had fallen behind in staving off the Barbarians. They couldn't let it be known that their insufficient strength led to Dragontan being left to fend for itself without reinforcements.

Tonukapoli took special care to word those matters without giving anything away. And yet...

“So you have insufficient military forces then.”

Takuto Ira’s remark accurately summarized the core of their problem. In any normal situation, his candid assessment would be grounds for offense, even if it was true—or rather, because it *was* true. However, it didn’t upset Tonukapoli.

After all, she understood she was dealing with a being that stood separate from the common man. He probably didn’t take normal sensibilities into consideration when he spoke. Rather, he just uttered exactly how he felt. In which case, it was pointless to resent every little thing he said. On the contrary, the more upset she became, the greater an advantage she was giving him.

However, she couldn’t let things end with him thinking they had insufficient military means. She needed to parry that comment with a good excuse.

Tonukapoli schooled her expression into one of serene calm as she responded to him at her leisure.

“Nah, we could handle them if we get serious. We’ve repelled their forces thus far. But that doesn’t change the fact that random and frequent Barbarian attacks are still a threat that we don’t want growing out of control. The other hard-headed Staff Holders are of the opinion that we should do a preliminary investigation rather than get caught off guard.”

It was a painfully bad excuse considering the current state Dragontan was in, but it also made sense. There was a level of persuasiveness behind pinning their inaction on slow, internal decision-making. This also let her communicate the Barbarian threat to Mynoghra.

They had yet to witness Barbarians suddenly showing up out of nowhere. Most of the time, Barbarians had to travel from far distances to reach a territory, or rather, that had always been the norm. When that happened, you could typically see them coming and see signs if they were traveling as a horde.

Dangerous creatures suddenly and randomly appearing within your territory would be a huge concern to any nation. Tonukapoli emphasized that point with her impassioned speech, diverting Mynoghra’s attention away from

Phon'kaven's waning military might.

"Barbarians are certainly a nuisance, Lady Tonukapoli. Especially the odd way with which they suddenly appear. I presume this is a case of single incidents being easy enough to deal with, but eliminating the root cause presents a greater difficulty?"

"Exactly, Lady Atou. That's why we're out here investigating the cause... We never expected to encounter your kingdom in the process, though."

"We were also surprised to run into you. We were actually in the process of sending a delegation to make contact with your people..."

I pulled it off! Tonukapoli internally celebrated her success.

She'd skillfully shifted Mynoghra's attention toward the Barbarians. Now she didn't have to worry about them taking advantage of Phon'kaven's insufficient military means. These negotiations would be a huge success worthy of celebration if she could just get them to offer military aid.

In fact, the Accursed Lands where Mynoghra existed was close to the town of Dragontan, so it wouldn't be strange for them to eventually run into Barbarians too. The Barbarians hadn't come for them yet, probably because of the complexities and chaos that made up the Accursed Lands, but there was no guarantee they'd continue to be safe in the future.

Furthermore, if Dragontan should fall, the Barbarians could turn it into their new base of operations. Unforeseen and random attacks would be a piddly threat compared to living next to their base.

Tonukapoli was confident they'd never let their towns fall into the hands of Barbarians, but Mynoghra might think differently. In other words, this was a problem that concerned them too. Tonukapoli made that abundantly clear as Phon'kaven's representative.

"Still, I must say that Dragontan is located in a difficult spot," Atou remarked. "I'm not one to speak on other nations' affairs, but it must be hard for Phon'kaven to keep such a distant and detached territory safe."

"Hm? Yeah, we've got our reasons for it."

This was another matter Tonukapoli had to keep their attention off of.

A Dragon Vein Mine existed within the town of Dragontan. They had accidentally come across this miracle land that spews out pure Mana during one of their scouting expeditions. So much Magic Power that no mortal could possibly control. Even Ceremonial Magic didn't require such large amounts of Mana.

They presently didn't have any means to utilize it, but if they could complete their research of the technology that would let them use the Dragon Vein Mine's Mana, then they'd obtain a power that would instantly set them apart from the other nations. For that purpose, they forced through the construction of Dragontan and commenced secretly researching it.

If not for the Barbarian problem, they would've completed their research of Military Magic by now.

Lamenting the unreasonableness of the world for making things never go their way, Tonukapoli lied through her teeth, keeping her voice flat all the while.

"Is that so? Well, building a town further away from your main territory does make it easier to claim ownership of the land, including the surrounding area," Atou said understandingly. "It's the way of the world for us to have various reasons for doing things and those things not proceeding as we hope."

"You can say that again. I'd be sipping tea at home right about now if not for those blasted Barbarians coming out of the woodwork... But meeting Mynoghra and King Takuto Ira was a stroke of good fortune amid all this misfortune... Though I hope you see our nation sending two of our strongest Staff Holders out to investigate a remote area as a sign of how well we are faring."

"We're glad to have met Phon'kaven as well."

"Yes, yes, you are absolutely right, King Takuto!" Atou exclaimed. "Our lives would be much easier if everyone in the world was as easy to talk to as the people of Phon'kaven."

The atmosphere surrounding their negotiation was the definition of tranquil. It appeared Tonukapoli had safely crossed the tightrope.

Fortunately, Pepe hadn't interjected himself into the conversation. Things wouldn't have gone this smoothly if he'd been actively involved.

Tonukapoli suddenly felt her heart drop as a horrible realization hit her. Why had Pepe remained silent all this time?

"Oh no!"

"???"

Everyone turned toward the person who let out that hysteric cry. Their gazes landed upon Pepe, who hadn't uttered a peep since the negotiations began. His boyish face was scrunched up in thought, his arms folded as he tapped them.

What in the Spirit realm had gotten into him? Was he struggling to follow their conversation?

"What's wrong?" Takuto asked before Tonukapoli could.

Pepe's brow remained furrowed as he gave a small nod in response to the question everyone present wanted to ask and truthfully said what was bothering him.

"Didn't we come to investigate the Accursed Lands to find some way to escape letting our country be destroyed?"

"Pepe...foolishness should have its limits even for you!"

"What? Am I wrong?"

"Er, well, what can I say, I sympathize with you, Lady Tonukapoli..." Atou said awkwardly.

"....."

Painful silence followed. No one possessed the ability to do anything other than keep their mouths shut. Tonukapoli was especially at her wit's end.

Who wouldn't be in her position? Her fellow diplomat blabbed about their nation's crisis in the middle of international negotiations. Not even she possessed a silver tongue capable of talking her way out of this one. Anyone, even a gifted genius, would struggle to overcome this difficult situation. That's how bad of a predicament Pepe's statement just placed Phon'kaven in.

However, no matter the dilemma presented by his slip of the tongue, their future still could go in many different directions depending on Mynoghra's response.

"Atou."

"Yes, King Takuto."

...And it appeared that Phon'kaven's future was headed in a surprisingly welcome direction.

"Lady Tonukapoli, please rest assured with the knowledge that we do not harbor any malicious intentions toward Phon'kaven."

The girl expressed Mynoghra's stance as if she were communicating with her king through an invisible connection. Her expression looked troubled. Tonukapoli understood she was being sympathetic to their blunder, and it was evident from the serious gleam in her crimson eyes that her words were meant neither as a joke nor a slight.

"It might be hard to believe, but we are more interested in the internal affairs of our nation than external ones. You may think it strange for evil beings such as us to have no ill intent toward the outside world, but that is who we are and how King Takuto wishes things to be."

Unbelievable words came from her pink lips.

It was generally believed that evil beings desired the suffering of all living things and the world's destruction. Their stance came across as bizarre and contrary to the commonly accepted belief about evil. But going by the way Mynoghra had welcomed them and the Dark Elves who served them, it clearly wasn't a bald-faced lie.

Unable to hide her confusion and unease, Tonukapoli shook her head and directed her question toward Takuto.

"But evil beings are— No, never mind. We also think it's, well, best if nothing bad happens, but—"

"Peace is best."

"...Mmm," Tonukapoli groaned.

What else could she say when that was their stance?

Tonukapoli didn't have nerves of steel, nor was she such an ignorant fool as to call Takuto Ira's intentions into question here.

But still, he threw out peace? At a time like this? Honestly, nothing sounded more suspicious to Tonukapoli than that, but in the off-chance he was telling the truth, they'd never run into another ally whose interests so perfectly aligned with their own.

"We just want to live every day quietly in peace," Atou insisted. "We are actually more concerned that other nations will be the ones to disrupt our peace."

"Yeah, I doubt Qualia or El-Nah will even be open to talking..."

"You understand our concerns?"

"They've made plenty of trouble for us too, yeah."

Tonukapoli agreed with their concerns. No matter how much Mynoghra loved peace and didn't ever intend to invade other nations, the same didn't apply to those nations.

Even a multiracial empire with an understanding of various cultures and religions like Phon'kaven struggled with how to judge them. So it was plain as daylight how those religious zealots who blindly believed in the goodness of gods and spirits and spent every waking moment praying would react to them.

Hmm. Tonukapoli started thinking about the future.

Phon'kaven would eventually be forced to make a decision.

To their north, they had the forces of good that advocated for order, sought obedience and allegiance, and would impose their laws on anyone who joined them.

And to their west, they had the forces of evil that declared they desired peace and harmony and sought friendship and open dialogue.

They were in for a big hassle no matter which side they joined—that much was clear. Tonukapoli's head hurt just thinking about it.

“But I see,” Atou said. “We can no longer consider this matter irrelevant to us. I believe we need to take some action. How do you wish to proceed, my king?”

“Friends help each other.”

“That’s my buddy Takuto Ira for you!!” Pepe squealed with delight.

“Keep your trap shut, Pepe!”

“*OUCHIE!* I’m getting hit a lot more than usual today!”

They had decided to offer their assistance while Tonukapoli was racking her brain. She decided to just go along with the flow, thinking what will be, will be. Trying to see the big picture as a small player only led to headaches.

Abandoning all thought during an important meeting was more than just a little foolish, but she hadn’t lived for several centuries with nothing to show for it. Her final trump card was still in place, and it was working just fine at the moment.

“The King has spoken,” Atou said. “We might be able to assist you with Dragontan. Besides, Barbarians possessing various abilities are also an enemy of interest to us...”

“Yaaay!!”

As she observed Pepe throwing his hands into the air with delight, Tonukapoli assessed the value Mynoghra’s aid would bring. She hadn’t determined their strength yet, but one look at Atou told her they’d be fine. Barbarians wouldn’t stand a chance against the King’s close confidant.

Their aid would allow Phon’kaven to switch from completely focusing on defense to launching a large-scale investigation into the root cause of the Barbarian outbreak. They’d been seriously considering abandoning Dragontan under recent circumstances. Now, the town’s continued survival was practically guaranteed. It was wonderful to see a possible bright future.

Tonukapoli nearly ran from the halls screaming when Pepe opened his big trap, but perhaps his outburst was actually taking them in a better direction. They were able to obtain everything they wanted from this negotiation even while the other party knew their weakness. They ought to return the favor in

kind.

At the very least, she knew they lacked daily necessities from their earlier trade talks. Now what would they ask for?

Bracing herself for what was to come, Tonukapoli asked what they wanted in return for their aid.

“We’re grateful for the assistance. But there ain’t anything more suspicious in the world than when someone says they’re just helping out of the good of their heart. You’re a bona fide nation yourself. You won’t move without good motive to. This little fool here made our problems clear to you, so...what do you want in return for your aid?”

“Since you asked...the Dragon Vein Mine,” Atou responded with an innocent grin.

Her instant response suddenly made everything clear. Tonukapoli cursed her careless self for walking straight into that one. Apparently, she was negotiating with someone a hundred steps ahead of her.

“So, you already knew about that...”

Now that she thought about it, Tonukapoli had never negotiated with another nation before. When she realized that, she understood some part of her had overestimated her own abilities. She’d been arrogant coming into this. At the same time, she also resigned herself to the thought that even if she had come into this armed to make a flawless transaction, it was questionable if she ever would’ve been on equal footing with Mynoghra.

Oh Spirits. I guess I can’t keep picking on Pepe for being a fool. She laughed at herself.

This was the worst possible situation. The Dragon Vein Mine was Phon’kaven’s most valuable secret. Even in the harsh environment of the Dark Continent, they still had hope for the future because they were anticipating what they could do with the enormous Mana brought about by the Dragon Vein Mine. Their future hinged on it.

If Mynoghra demanded it as payment, they would have a difficult time standing on equal footing with other nations in the future. At the very least,

they wouldn't be able to stand up to Mynoghra.

"We don't mind sharing joint control of it," Atou suggested. "We don't currently have any need for that much Mana, after all. However, we will be the ones to specify the converted element."

"Elemental conversion of pure Mana from the Dragon Vein Mine...eh? We're currently in the process of researching that technology, but I see your nation is already in possession of it."

"Oh my, I guess we beat you to it?"

Atou's remark helped Tonukapoli realize that her people were in the middle of a huge turning point in history. It was impossible to deceive them from the start, and it wasn't any easier to break off their newly established alliance. Apparently, the only path left was to join hands with this nation that appeared to be several steps ahead of them in terms of Magic Technology.

In that case, it was time to accept their fate. They might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

Tonukapoli broke the slightly nervous, hard expression she'd been maintaining and let out a bray of laughter as she leaned comfortably back in her chair. She made up her mind.

"King Takuto Ira, Lady Atou," she addressed her hosts. "Pepe here is a fool, you see. The biggest fool in our country!" she proclaimed with a tad of humor mixed with pride as she shrugged.

Her sudden proclamation earned blank looks from both Atou and Takuto, and they seemed to be searching for the right words to respond. Meanwhile, the boy she dubbed a fool was bent over with laughter as if he found the whole thing funny.

"Er...I can't comment on that."

"You shouldn't pick on him."

Mynoghra's leaders mildly scolded her on Pepe's behalf.

Tonukapoli howled with laughter at these two evil beings whose caring comments belied their wickedness. "But," she continued through her laughter,

“little Pepe here has the best eye for people. He can determine one’s character better than anyone in our nation... He’s never been wrong. Not even once.”

Phon’kaven played their trump card. They decided to bet everything on Pepe’s ability—on the greatest Staff Holder their nation ever had. On the talents of their great Commander who’d open a path for their nation during a time of crisis.

Every nation has a last resort that is effective enough to influence its fate. The form of that ability varies depending on the times and national policies, but Phon’kaven was no exception. No one in the world—not even beings who came from the outside like Takuto—knew about this ultimate rule.

“Pepe! You decide. You have that authority as a Staff Holder.”

Why did Takuto agree to establish a friendly alliance so easily?

Why hadn’t Atou taken offense at her almighty king being called Pepe’s buddy with no honorifics?

Something was taking place in secret.

“Silly, Granny. I said it from the second we met...”

It had secretly activated, unknown to all present and in the greater world.

“I want to be friends with Mynoghra.”

It was called The Great Ritual.

“...You heard him. In the name of Staff Holder Tonukapoli and Staff Holder Pepe, we formally seek a friendly alliance between our nation of Phon’kaven and Mynoghra. You good with that?”

“We gladly accept.”

An alliance was formed. All at Tonukapoli and Pepe’s discretion.

Normally, such a big decision shouldn’t be made until they returned to their country and discussed it with the other Staff Holders. That was what was expected of them, and it wouldn’t be strange for their arbitrary decision-making to be decried as an abuse of their power as Staff Holders.

But they did it anyway.

It was unknown what the result of their decision would be, but for some reason, the two leaders who came from Phon'kaven were convinced this was for the best.



Perfect Negotiation (Phon'kaven)

Great Ritual

Will bring about impossible results far beyond expectations in sensitive negotiations that dictate the fate of your country. Inverts every negative factor into a positive, securing the best possible outcome.

※ You can only activate this effect while negotiating with the Commander Pepe the Fool

※ You cannot activate it a second time



SYSTEM MESSAGE

Great Ritual "Perfect Negotiation" has been activated.

The relationship between Phon'kaven and Mynoghra will never degrade from "Friendly."

※ Excludes the decrease in Mynoghra's favorable impression caused by Phon'kaven's intentional betrayal.

※ The impact of this negotiation's result on the future of Phon'kaven is "Tremendous."

OK

Chapter 5: Review

THE sudden encounter with another empire and the amicable talks that followed became the main topic of discussion for Takuto and the rest of Mynoghra's empire-management council immediately after their banquet with Phon'kaven's delegates ended.

"None of us expected our initial talks to accomplish so much in such a short period of time," Atou started. "While this is wonderful news, we now have a lot of different factors and materials to take into consideration. You are in for some sleepless nights, Elder Moltar."

"Gladly," Elder Moltar responded. "Still, *hmm*, we need to select what Food to trade with and confirm what Supplies we want in return. Should we secure a mutual means of communication for future exchanges first...? Or perhaps it would be better to select which troops to send first."

"Yes, taking what they said into consideration, they're seeking urgent defense aid. Ensuring the Dragon Vein Mine's safety is of critical importance to us as well. Drawing pure Mana directly from the earth will have a momentous impact on our development. Frankly speaking, our strategies going forward will greatly differ based on our ability to produce and collect Food and Resources."

Atou was carefully examining their options with Mynoghra's wisest mortal, Elder Moltar. Warrior Captain Gia and Emle, who had been promoted from Takuto's secretary to Minister of Domestic Affairs, were also called to the meeting to exchange their frank opinions.

They'd actually been present for the negotiation talks, but since Takuto and Atou had everything under control, they didn't muddy the waters. While there wasn't really a need to explain what they had agreed upon, they did hastily enter into a deal and made rough arrangements with no time to discuss it among themselves, so they were now working out the details of their policies after the fact.

“Hrm,” Elder Moltar hummed. “The folks from Phon’kaven committed a huge blunder too. I can’t believe they came to us with such a childish negotiator.”

“Yes, you can absolutely say that again. As Lady Tonukapoli said, he’s not the brightest star in the sky—more like the dullest. Though I can’t bring myself to dislike him.”

They weren’t a dislikable bunch. Sure, they were foolish, childish, and would likely receive failing marks in every category, but Atou thought they deserved a passing grade based solely on the fact they weren’t hostile toward Mynoghra. Elder Moltar and the other Dark Elves shared her opinion and didn’t know how to react beyond pulling a face.

“My king,” Elder Moltar diffidently addressed Takuto. “Please don’t take this as me objecting to your excellent decision, but one of the negotiators—Lord Pepe—seemed like quite the imbecile. Won’t it be risky having such a person as an allied Commander?”

Takuto and Atou had incessantly instructed the council members to raise any concerns they may have rather than stew over it in silence. Hence, no one reprimanded Elder Moltar for being rude toward the King with his frank query. Seeing as Gia, Emle, and even Atou were giving Takuto searching looks, they must’ve harbored the same doubts.

“Hmm.”

Is that really all there is to that boy? Takuto wondered.

Pepe was definitely a few cards short of a full deck. He came across as a dimwit who didn’t think things through. This was especially true of his gaffe toward the end of their negotiation. He’d allowed Mynoghra to conclude negotiations in a fairly favorable position. As a result, they were able to peacefully obtain the Dragon Vein Mine at the low cost of diverting some military resources.

On the other hand, Phon’kaven also received the best possible outcome for the situation they found themselves in. They seemed to be having a hard time dealing with the Barbarians and weren’t able to take care of Dragontan, as Takuto had suspected.

Pepe's gaffe led to Mynoghra dispatching troops for combined operations when they otherwise would've only exchanged limited military information with each other. In other words, their relationship would have remained a friendly encounter where they would've taken an indefinite amount of time to talk things out. If things hadn't played out the way they did, would Phon'kaven still have had the strength to protect Dragontan...?

Come to think of it, it's too unnatural to shout when he did... I don't know... You're really a dummy, Pepe.

But Takuto didn't think it was all that bad to have become friends with the dimwitted boy. Given the situation in each other's empires, they had no reason to be enemies, and unlike the time with Qualia's Paladins, talks went without a hitch.

There might be some friction between evil and neutral civilizations, but not enough to prevent them from forming an alliance. Actually, if he looked at it objectively, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they had obtained an unexpectedly good result.

Takuto was particularly impressed by the fact he became friends with Pepe. After all, he was originally someone who'd considered the hospital his home. He couldn't make any friends there and thought friendship was out of reach for him.

And now he suddenly had a friend. There was no way he wouldn't be thrilled.

I'm worried about the Barbarians, but it'd be perfect if we could continue to be friendly with Phon'kaven.

That being said, everything was still in its infancy.

Someone once said that nations don't have friends, only interests. Those interests evolve over time, and so past agreements must be revisited. Should the tides change, Phon'kaven, and Pepe along with it, would take measures against Mynoghra.

There's no debate when it comes down to having to choose between an ally nation and your citizens. Takuto obviously knew which he would pick if he were put in that situation.

In any case, the present state of things was the picture of calm.

Indeed, things were as calm and peaceful as a glassy lake on a sunny day.

What Takuto wanted to happen the most had happened, albeit with just one other empire. He'd keep an eye on them, but there was no reason to hate them.

He had but one answer then...

"King Takuto? Do you have an opinion on the matter?" Atou asked.

"Yeah. My evaluation of Pepe is on hold for now. He's probably...okay."

"Understood, my king."

Everyone present bowed deeply in response to Takuto's quick decision. This was the definitive decision made by the King of Ruin and Mynoghra's Commander, Takuto Ira. His words came from the greatest depths of wisdom, and there was no room for negative feelings, let alone meaning.

Takuto nodded satisfactorily before the steely loyalty of his subordinates.

A thorough command hierarchy is what's needed to run a healthy organization. Limbs that execute what the brain wants without error are what's most required to move the behemoth known as an empire.

Takuto worried that as long as emotions were involved, he would have to deal with human errors that weren't a factor in the game, such as differences in opinion and misunderstanding instructions. Still, Mynoghra was achieving satisfactory results as his limbs. Since that was the case, he could now devise various strategies to his heart's content.

Taking care of the Barbarian problem came first. Something was causing them to behave differently from usual. That was a strange and threatening factor.

Enemies randomly appearing out of nowhere almost sounds like what would happen in a role playin—

A humorous thought crossed his mind. Before he could finish it, he pushed it out with a wry smile.

Talks with Phon'kaven had ended in success. Takuto and Mynoghra learned

much from their first negotiation and used it as a source of encouragement and growth.



IN the Grand Council Room built within the Palace, Takuto and his council discussed their next policies as they sat around a mountain of documents containing information on Phon'kaven and their arrangements.

"Now then, you all did a great job yesterday," Atou said. "A lot of unexpected things happened, but we managed to establish friendly relations with Phon'kaven. This will definitely benefit our peace-loving empire, Mynoghra. Do you have anything to add, my king?"

"Yeah. Good job, everybody."

The Dark Elves bowed their heads, looking touched to receive such words from their king. Since coming to this world, Takuto learned that small interactions were necessary to gain unswerving loyalty as a leader. He initially thought the best rewards were monetary, physical goods, or status-related, but sometimes praise and giving credit where credit was due turned out to be the best reward of all.

Everyone likes to be complimented when they are trying their hardest, and how much more poignant would that praise be if it came from their revered king?

The fact that he was the object they revered was unnerving, but Takuto gave a big nod, his mind made up to start talking to everyone more often. He hoped that would cure his fear of speaking in front of others, too.

Seeing him nod, Emle took that as the go-ahead to move the meeting along.

"To get started, I would like to reconfirm the details of our negotiations with Phon'kaven and make any final decisions. We can break the terms of the agreement into three big categories. The first is the establishment of diplomatic relations. The second is a mutual trade agreement. The third is a defense pact agreement."

"I see, I see. This sounds like it'll be another fruitful meeting." Atou happily nodded along, satisfied to see Mynoghra finally shaping up as a nation now that

it had established diplomatic relations.

The Dark Elves looked much more relaxed after having overcome the critical moment with the foreign delegation.

“Why don’t we decide on our policies while we analyze each term in detail? Let’s start with diplomatic relations first. Does anyone have any opinions or concerns regarding this?”

Emle led the meeting with practiced ease. Her gaze had already shifted to the documents and notes in front of her. She pushed her glasses up as she waited with a stoic expression for someone to speak up.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

But silence was their response. It seemed like everyone was searching for something to say on the topic. Silence begets more silence. Everyone, including Takuto, was aware of a certain problem but was hesitant to be the one to point it out.

After all, it was a very basic and ridiculous problem to have. But letting the silence run on was a waste of time. The moment everyone was about to open their mouth to say something—

“Well, um...”

Someone else beat them to it. The youngest person present, Caria, broke the silence. Seeing as her older sister had her hand raised with a grin, it appeared the twins had a question to ask.

“Do you want to ask a question? You are both as much a part of this meeting as the rest of us, so you are free to say whatever is on your mind,” Emle quickly encouraged them, and the rest of the council eagerly nodded in support.

It was the council members’ job to push through the awkward silence, and they all felt guilty for forcing that uncomfortable role onto such a young child. At the same time, they wanted to lavish her with praise for speaking up. It’d be even better if she voiced the concerns they all secretly harbored.

At the center of the pathetic adults' attention, the youngest member pointed out the fundamental problem plaguing them all.

"What *kinda* country is Phon'kaven?" Caria asked.

"I don't know it either," Maria added.

Awkwardness settled over the council room.

Maria usually said whatever came to her mind at her own pace, but they felt awful for making Caria broach the subject. Still, everyone silently applauded them for having the guts to say it.

"...That's where we should start, huh?" Takuto muttered in a quiet yet clear enough voice for everyone to hear, earning silent nods from the room.

Indeed, this was the problem that was incredibly difficult for any of them to admit in a room full of their peers—none of them knew much about the empire called Phon'kaven.

"My, you make a fine point," Elder Moltar said. "We certainly know little to nothing about Phon'kaven. Of course, we've gathered some information and already presented it to His Majesty. But what of their current situation? It's only logical that it's impossible to hammer out the details of our arrangement without understanding the other nation. Before we do anything else, we must first take a closer look at their empire."

Elder Moltar's comments stoked the meeting's fire. Now that they'd openly acknowledged the embarrassing truth, they could finally start the meeting in true.

"I couldn't be more ashamed," Elder Moltar lamented. "We Dark Elves were so blinded by our joy of this celebratory arrangement that we neglected to exercise due diligence."

Elder Moltar, Gia, and Emle all bowed their heads in shame. Takuto awkwardly looked away, since he hadn't realized this critical point either, and held up his hand to signal them to raise their heads.

"It's fine. I failed to notice too."

"I-I agree... These things happen," Atou said. "No one is to blame. We should

actually be glad we realized our ignorance sooner rather than later.”

“You humble us with your words...”

The Dark Elves closed their eyes to bask in Takuto and Atou’s lenience and bowed their heads once again. The truth was that Takuto and Atou were guilty of the same negligence, so they just wanted to move on without dwelling on it.

“I-In the game, everything from another empire’s tradable Luxury Items to their Happiness Levels can be found in the Diplomacy Panel, so I didn’t take the rest into consideration...” Takuto communicated telepathically to Atou.

“The game doesn’t depict the true state of affairs or the nitty-gritty details of an empire, after all. It escaped our notice...” she responded.

If there was one leading cause for this problem, it was simply everyone’s inexperience dealing with such matters. For Atou and Takuto, it was the small things about this world that completely differed from the game that threw them off. For the Dark Elves, it was their blind faith in their king and the flood of sudden events taking them for a ride that had narrowed their focus, blinding them to other factors.

Their inexperience in dealing with other empires may have led them to overlook some things, but it wasn’t a fatal oversight. If anything, it was an invaluable experience to become aware of any miscalculations they might make at this stage in the game.

Strangely enough, everyone seemed to be of the same mind on the matter and decided to apply themselves to solving the problem at hand.

“In that case, it’s necessary for us to investigate Phon’kaven first. But we don’t have much time with the defense pact agreement in place and the need to offer Dragontan assistance...” Emle trailed off.

“Then we’d better gather intel on them at the same time we are deciding what troops to send to their aid,” Atou finished for her.

“I agree, Atou. On the other hand, I think we can safely set aside matters regarding trade for the time being,” Emle suggested. “It will be difficult to transport goods if the Barbarian attacks happen as frequently as they said.”

“No one’s lives are riding on trade, after all. Dragontan may be in trouble if they have low Food supplies, but we need to investigate them first to know such things...”

In the end, they decided visiting Dragontan once to gather information on their new allies would net them the best results.

Information gathering is not just about sending in spies and bringing back classified documents from off-limit zones. A lot can be learned simply by looking around a town in the open like a normal resident or visitor. Publicly accessible information is sometimes of paramount importance, as evidenced by the significant restrictions placed on journalists’ activities in closed military nations.

And considering the state of things between Phon’kaven and Mynoghra, going in person to confirm things with their own eyes was the safest and most efficient method.

“*Hmm*. How about sending a delegation?” Gia suggested before anyone else.

Mynoghra had originally intended to send a delegation to Dragontan. Gia figured they could immediately dispatch the delegation if they stuck with their initial plan and unit formation. Of course, that would require their representative, Atou, to go, but he didn’t think she would refuse.

“I have some concerns regarding that plan...”

But someone raised an objection to his proposal—his former adjutant, Emle.

A proper meeting consists of the exchange of multiple ideas before making the final decision. Understanding that well, Gia didn’t feel offended by his former subordinate keeping her eyes trained on her documents rather than looking at him when she objected. He patiently waited for her reasoning.

“During our talks with Phon’kaven, we learned about the unusual situation afflicting their entire nation, including their capital, in the form of a huge surge of Barbarian attacks. We still need to confirm if it’s true, but I don’t think it’s wise for us to leave our own capital with less of a military presence.”

“You mean we need to leave enough men behind to protect the King should the unexpected occur?” Gia surmised.

The information gathered from their talks with Phon'kaven was of vital importance to Mynoghra as well. Whether it'd become good or bad news for them was yet to be seen. This particular information fell into the latter category.

Phon'kaven, an empire that had established itself in this region long ago, was being assailed by an anomaly unlike anything they had ever experienced before. That fact alone was more than enough information to merit raising their alertness level.

King Takuto Ira and the Hero Atou were the mainstays of Mynoghra, followed by the Imperial Capital where they resided. They'd never recover if they fell under attack while there was a hole in their defenses.

Emle made an incredibly valid point.

In that case, should they just send someone random to look around?

No, that presented a different problem.

The people picked by the empire-management council for this particular recon mission would be dispatched with King Takuto Ira's approval. They needed to send someone who'd show respect to their ally and wouldn't cause friction.

Dragontan would be confused if someone from another country suddenly showed up saying they wanted to check out their town. Their alliance was barely a day old. They needed to select someone who could be trusted to maintain a good relationship with the town of Dragontan should they run into any unforeseen trouble. But such people were critical to Mynoghra's safety, which brought them back to square one.

"But I want to check out their town."

A lack of information during war times is usually paid for with a loss of soldiers. While they had some information, from a defense point of view, Takuto wanted to avoid dispatching soldiers for combined operations until he understood what he was sending them into.

I want to survey the area through shared vision with one of our citizens at least once... Takuto thought.

Forming a delegation was a no-go. Even so, if they were going out of their way to visit the town, they needed to keep up appearances with a certain number of people. They were short on time, so it didn't need to be anything too grand; they just needed a pretense to send a few people who wouldn't offend their ally.

What were their options?

Everyone thought about it at length, their brows furrowed.

The deadlock was once again broken by one of the twins.

"Let's go play!"

Maria had stopped gazing absently out the window to raise her hand and speak her thoughts.

Did the girl grow bored of the meeting? No one could scold her too harshly when they knew about her broken mind, and when Emle, the best person at looking after others, tried to think of a way to address her, Caria tapped her older sister on the shoulder and mildly reproved her.

"Big Sista, we're in the middle of a meeting, we can go play later— Aah, is that what you mean?"

"Oh? Do you girls have something in mind?"

Apparently, the girl wanting to go play was meant as something more than it had sounded to the adults.

A little disconcerted with the girl who occasionally said things that didn't make sense, Emle looked to her younger sister to put it into words she could understand.

"Big Sista is suggesting we send people who are currently free to go under the pretext of sightseeing," Caria said, interpreting what her sister meant. "*Um...* didn't Master Pepe say we could come play anytime we want, Your Majesty?"

"Yeah. Pepe said we could come over to play."

"Then I don't think they'll get angry if we go there to play."

At that suggestion, Emle quickly shifted through the documents in front of

her. She definitely remembered that exchange occurring between Takuto and Pepe during the negotiations. Most of what they'd said to each other was small talk and lip service, but Pepe did indeed make them that offer. He didn't stop there either, he even extended his invitation to everyone present, saying, "You are all welcome to come anytime!"

"I see... How about we go with that angle, Emle?"

Emle gave a big nod in response to Atou's question. This was the key to unlocking the solution they needed.

"Yes, I think it makes perfect sense for us to send several people ahead of time to greet the mayor and establish contact. Creating an open channel of communication with their mayor in advance should be received favorably on their end as well. It also wouldn't look bad to only send a few people for this purpose. Furthermore, we can keep up appearances because of Master Pepe's open invitation."

They finally had the pretense they needed. The plan also had Emle's endorsement, which was big, as she was an avid reader and possessed an understanding of the etiquette that must be maintained between empires. All that was left was to consider who they should actually send to greet the mayor.

Did they really have to jump through so many hoops just to check out a town?

Takuto, who was forced to face the things not depicted in the game, was steadily learning the elements necessary for empire management, although he found them a little tiring.

"Who should we send then? The mission will likely span two to three days, so I think it's all right to actually make sightseeing a piece of what you're doing," Atou said.

"May I go then?" Elder Moltar inquired, raising his hand. "I'm sure there will be a meeting with the mayor, and I don't mean to sound presumptuous, but I believe I am the right man for the job."

Certainly, a man as wise as he fit the requirements, and he was not currently in charge of any crucial projects he couldn't allocate to someone else for that period of time. Just as everyone was about to recommend him to Takuto—

“Not a good idea.”

The King himself shot down the idea.

“Forgive me for overstepping my bounds, my king.”

“I thought he’d be perfect for the job, too. Is there a reason why you object, King Takuto?” Atou asked on behalf of everyone present who was taken off guard by his objection.

Obviously, he wasn’t bullying Elder Moltar or found him lacking in anything. In which case, there must’ve been some strategic factor the rest of them hadn’t realized. They wanted to confirm what that was.

“Moltar is too important.”

Several of the council members tilted their heads in confusion at Takuto’s reasoning. Even Elder Moltar was staring into space, stroking his beard as he contemplated his king’s words. Strangely enough, it was Warrior Captain Gia who figured out what Takuto meant first.

“I see, this old goat is certainly just a wise old man to us, but from the perspective of other countries, he is Mynoghra’s Chancellor and the Minister of Magic. He’s too much of a big shot to send to greet a town mayor.”

“Grr,” Elder Moltar grunted. “You always ruin a fine comment with one word too many, Gia. But you are right, sonny. I continue to be amazed by His Highness’s astuteness. Going by that same logic, Gia is our General, and Emle is Minister of Domestic Affairs. Both serve in too high of a position for this role.”

Everyone was finally on the same page with Gia and Elder Moltar’s explanations.

Yes, Mynoghra was still an empire even if it only had a select few elites at this point. And Takuto had shown his empire’s prestige to its fullest during the negotiations with Phon’kaven. Then it was only natural for their ally to view the people who served at the top of his empire as important figures.

“What about me?”

“You are His Majesty’s closest, most trusted attendant, Lady Atou. As our great Hero, you are the last person who should go.”

“Well, when you put it like that! I am King Takuto’s confidant!”

Atou had only asked to have her position confirmed since no one brought up her name. She was satisfied with their response but also annoyed that it proved she couldn’t be of any use to her king for this task.

Mynoghra was in an awkward position when it came to government officials. If Elder Moltar and the rest of the council fell under the Minister class, then they were entirely lacking any vice-ministers and down. While they were indeed suffering from a lack of talented people to choose from, this also served as a testament to Elder Moltar and the council members being so skilled the rest of the Dark Elves couldn’t live up to what Takuto and Atou had come to expect.

Who should they pick then?

Everyone looked around the Grand Council Room searching for the right person for the job—all eyes landed squarely on the same spot.

“Me, me!”

“U-Um, well...Big Sista and I will go.”

“Ugh,” someone groaned.

It was true that everyone’s gaze went to the twin girls. But they all also wondered if they were really the right choice.

“I’ll do my best.”

“I will do my bestest!”

The twins were all for it. Of all the Dark Elf children, these two girls were especially loyal to Takuto and Mynoghra. It was no wonder that the two of them, who were always trying to repay Takuto, would be eager to take on this important mission.

But...

“Wouldn’t that be too dangerous?”

That was Takuto’s biggest concern. He already viewed the girls like family. Their young age only further added to his apprehension.

“It *is* dangerous for them, but I also feel that their position is conversely too

low for this role. Besides that, they are such young children, it's bound to make Dragontan's mayor uncomfortable..."

As a fellow member of the "Pamper and Protect the Twins" Faction, Emle spoke in support of Takuto's concerns.

"No, they are perfect for the job."

But as a member of the "Let Cute Little Girls Go on Trips" Faction, Elder Moltar had a different point of view.

"Um, why might that be?"

"They have both been selected to be trained and raised up as future leaders of Mynoghra by the King. We have already explained this to Phon'kaven during our talks," Elder Moltar argued. "That gives them the perfect status for the job. And, if anything, their town should be more welcoming of children who don't have ulterior political motives."

"Ugh...that's a sound point."

This mission hinged on two things: their visit shouldn't be made into a big deal, and they mustn't be rude to their hosts. Oddly enough, the twins were just right for the job in that regard. As children, Dragontan wouldn't be expected to go all-out to welcome them. At the same time, their position as future leader candidates under the direct tutelage of the King cemented their status in a way that wouldn't offend the other nation.

On the contrary, it'd be a tall order to ask them to find someone better suited than the girls.

"The fact they don't have any actual authority should be viewed more favorably," Elder Moltar continued. "The mayor won't have to go out of their way to kowtow to their every need, at the same time knowing we aren't disrespecting them with our choice of a representative."

Emle really didn't want to put the twins in danger, but she also couldn't argue with that logic, so she grudgingly fell silent.

"I see, I see. Sounds like a fine plan to me. I had already determined they would be the best option but refrained from saying anything to measure your

ability to come to the same conclusion. You did a truly marvelous job!!”

“But isn’t it still too dangerous for them?”

Takuto once again expressed his concerns, lightly dispelling Atou’s obvious attempts at hiding the fact she hadn’t kept up with the conversation at all.

Phon’kaven may be an ally nation, but it was still outside Mynoghra. He would have them escorted by a guard detail, but what would he do if something happened to the two young girls after he sent them away?

Takuto could sense the approximate location of his units—or in this case, citizens who belonged to his empire—but it’d still take too long to act if they came under attack. Even if he noticed their duress from Mynoghra, Dragontan was too far away to quickly rescue them, leaving their safety in the hands of the guard detail.

That was a gamble he wasn’t sure he wanted to take.

Takuto was overprotective of the twins.

And Atou was overprotective of Takuto.

Noticing the turmoil on her king’s face, Atou slammed her hand on the table and angrily rose to her feet as if this was her time to come to his aid.

“His Majesty is worried! It’s too soon to send the girls as an envoy! What if they get kidnapped?!” Atou complained like a child throwing a temper tantrum. But the Dark Elves had witnessed her tantrums plenty of times before, so they weren’t startled by it. “Aaaaah! It’s too terrifying to even think about! This strategy is out! *Out*, I say!”

Just as Atou said, if Takuto opposed, the plans they had just discussed would be discarded. Takuto had the final say in everything. Atou’s complaints aside, if he had concerns, there weren’t many ways to change his mind and overturn his decision.

However, one of those ways was sitting next to him at the table.

“Your Majesty, it’s something that mustest be done eventually. Besides, you are the one who told us we are free to do what we want. Being useful to you is what we sisters want to do with our freedom. Please allow it,” Caria earnestly

implored.

Takuto was incredibly protective of the twins, and he also had a soft spot when it came to their requests. The stubbornness he'd been showing instantly crumbled away at the girl's sincere request.

"But...if anything happens—"

"We are prepared for that."

"*Nggghhhh*," Takuto groaned, arms folded at his chest.

All decisions were left to the King's discretion. And Takuto, the King, was at an impasse.

Atou could only watch over him as he worked through it.

And Takuto was assailed by the most devilish technique devised to overturn the situation.

"Your Majesty, pretty *please*."

"Awawawa."

Maria quietly moved out of her chair to stand beside Takuto. She took his arm in her hands as she gazed up at him with precious puppy-dog eyes.

"*Please* let us do it, Your Majesty."

"*U-Uggghhh...*"

He was struck by the same attack by the younger sister on his opposite side. The twins wore down his defenses with a pincher pleading attack.

"Pretty, pretty *please*," they said in unison.

Was it just his imagination that their voices sounded so sweet?

Either way, their attack did him in. Takuto sucked in a huge breath and exhaled before Atou could intercede.

"Okay," he said with a gentle smile.

"Yay!" the girls cheered.

He was easily defeated by their dual assault.

“Our king has succumbed to wheedling!! Oh, the *horror!*” Atou cried out

Takuto looked away, wishing she wouldn’t proclaim such things in a loud voice. He was aware that he did indeed fall for their wheedling, which made Atou’s observation all the more painful. Nonetheless, he permitted it. With his mindset changed, Takuto vowed to help the girls fulfill their duties as they’d requested.

“But, Your Majesty, what will we do about their escort?” Emle asked, worried. “I doubt anyone will kidnap them, but we can’t just send them alone...”

She made a valid point. However, Takuto already had a solution for keeping them safe. He happened to know of excellent pawns that could serve as their guardians and escort.

“I have something just for that,” Takuto declared in a calm voice to reassure Emle.

Mynoghra couldn’t afford to let anyone idle around.

Takuto was just thinking about what job he could assign to these pawns, so this worked out perfectly.



“OH, come on, Atou. I didn’t give in just because little girls begged me to. I wanted to respect their initiative, and it’s true that they are suited for this kind of scout mission. It’s not a bad plan as long as we send people along to support them as our representatives,” Takuto rattled off like he was making excuses, which he actually was. He hadn’t spoken like this in quite a while.

The reason goes without saying—he was trying to improve Atou’s mood after she was completely bent out of shape from him spoiling the twins.

“Ha! Say what you will! I’m still not convinced!”

Atou’s reasonable side understood that there weren’t any real problems with his decision. She also understood the twins’ desire to be useful to Takuto as his devoted vassals. But just because the logical side of her mind could be convinced didn’t mean her emotional side was.

Atou’s petulance was entirely caused by the fact Takuto had let another girl

win him over and have her way with him. She wasn't letting it slide simply because her feelings as a girl in love wouldn't stand for it.

"It's not His Majesty's fault, Lady Atou. It's because we were being selfish."

Sensing the awkwardness between them, Caria tried desperately to aid Takuto in improving Atou's mood.

"Hmph! Go ahead and form a harem of little girls, King Takuto! Hero Atou will step down from her pedestal!"

But her attempt only made things worse. Atou's mood only grew more foul.

"Awawawa..."

Thus, the King of Ruin only grew more pitiful.

If there was a "Dependability" stat in this world, Takuto would currently have exactly 0 points in it. His flustered, overwrought behavior lacked all dignity, leaving just a cowed boy in its place.

"Your Majesty..."

"Hm?"

Someone beckoned him closer—it was the older sister, Maria. Curious about what she wanted, he moved closer, and she whispered a certain strategy into his ear. He nodded throughout her explanation, giving the biggest nod of all at the end. Mind made up, he marched over to Atou, who was still steaming mad.

"Atou..."

"Wh-What is it?" Atou faltered before his commanding aura. She thought she was in for a scolding for acting so irritable. But contrary to appearances, Takuto offered her words of unbelievable kindness.

"Thank you for thinking about me."

"What?!" she squeaked. "Um..."

It was too abrupt for her to temper her reaction.

Takuto lifted her hand in his and soothed her with his suave words. "I have only made it this far because you were with me from the beginning. I really regret making you, of all people, angry."

Atou bobbed her head up and down so hard, he feared she might snap her neck. She was wide-eyed with apprehension over the sudden shift in Takuto's behavior.

"I need *you*. Won't you please cheer up, Atou?"

Takuto conveyed what he wanted to say to her most all while wondering whether wording it this way was really okay. In other words, he wanted to apologize and express his gratitude for her. And it seemed to be getting through to her just fine.

"You're the *only* one for me, Atou."

"Y-Yes, King Takuto..."

Actually, it seemed like he'd conveyed a little too much. Atou's face turned crimson so fast, he almost expected to hear it accompanied by a sound effect. Her delight was tangible, seeing as the redness traveled all the way to the exposed parts of her chest.

You are better off saying what you really think rather than trying to play it off—that was the advice Maria had whispered to him. Takuto followed her advice to a T and laid his feelings bare, but it appeared to be a little too stimulating.

"*Uh*, Atou?"

"*Ufufu!* Whatever is on your mind, *my* precious King Takuto?"

Atou was giving off an aura that screamed "I'm so happy!" She entered her own world with her hands pressed against both cheeks, making it seem as if they were the only ones enjoying a peaceful spring afternoon.

"Ah, *er*, well, I was just wondering if you've forgiven me..."

"For what? I could never be angry at *my* King Takuto. You're so silly."

"I-I see! Glad to hear it!"

Atou was easy to appease. When it came to Takuto, she was a forgiving woman who could let bygones be bygones if he treated her with a little kindness. She was the type who'd end up horribly dumped after the guy she fell head over heels for was done playing with her. Of course, the more intense the emotion one has, the worse of a fall out there will be, so any guy who tried that

with her was bound to lose his head.

However, Takuto didn't have to worry about that.

Women who put their whole hearts into a relationship only do well with sincere and faithful men. Not to mention the fact Atou was a creature of Mynoghra. So anyone who dared to play with her would suffer immeasurably.

In the end, Takuto narrowly escaped certain death by following Maria's sound advice.

Takuto was just glad that he had succeeded in repairing her mood, none the wiser that she was currently enjoying delusions of newlywed life with him. It was the way of the world for there always to be an eventual price paid for having insinuated things with a woman and playing with her heart, but it was up in the air whether it was fortunate or unfortunate not to be paying that price now...

It was truly a case of "Only God knows."

"King Takuto, who are you planning to send with them as an escort? Honestly, I don't think any of the Dark Elves are fit for the job..."

Apparently, Atou had played out her delusions in full. She shifted the topic to who would be joining the twins on the mission. It appeared Atou was as clueless about his pick as the Dark Elves. Feeling a little giddy about that, Takuto turned toward her and held up a finger.

"I'm actually planning on sending the units we spawned the other day."

"...Y-You can't mean *them*, can you?"

"Yes, *them*."

Takuto grinned with a look that said "How do you like them apples?"

At first, Atou was surprised by his crazy proposal, but after a while, she realized the merits of his choice and was impressed by his keen insight.

But not even Takuto, the King who would bring ruin to the world, could have predicted the chaos awaiting him.

Chapter 6: Escort

THEY had come to a pure-white facility built into a giant tree. The only difference between it and the rest of the city built in the trees by the Dark Elves was its color. The building was clearly special because they had purposefully painted it white.

“Okay, girls, who can tell me what this building is?” Takuto asked the twins like a father might as they stood outside the building.

“It’s a Clinic.”

Of course, the twins, who were constantly studying empire management to someday help Takuto, knew exactly what the facility was called.

“And what is it for?”

“To heal the sick.”

“That’s right.”

The Clinic was a building from *Eternal Nations* and what they’d chosen to construct after the Flesh Trees. It improved the city’s Sanitation and increased the Resilience of the units stationed there. Of course, it also functioned as a regular clinic, making it possible to heal sick and injured citizens. Since it didn’t cost much to build, it was completed in less than a month, and construction of the next facility, the Magic Research Institute, was already underway.

That was the extent of the twins’ knowledge on the subject. They knew of the Clinic but hadn’t actually used it yet. They probably would’ve needed its services if they were in the same malnourished state Takuto had found them in, but fortunately, the food provided by the King dramatically improved the girls’ health. And so, they never needed to visit the medical facility.

“Your escort is in there.”

“In...*there*?”

Caria clamped her mouth shut after accidentally making a comment that sounded like she doubted Takuto. Maria also had her head tilted to one side, baffled. Takuto chuckled at their reactions, then opened the doors to the Clinic that wasn't much larger than a normal dwelling.

"Anybody home?"

Caria, Maria, and Atou, who didn't have anything better to do than follow them, entered the Clinic after Takuto. The entrance seemed to double as a waiting room as it only had a few tables and chairs. The interior was dimly lit, creating an oddly eerie atmosphere.

Apparently, barely anyone ever used it, and it seemed Takuto and the girls were the only people there.

After waiting for a while, three figures suddenly appeared from within the dimly lit room in response to Takuto's voice.

They stood about as tall as an average Dark Elf adult male. Since Dark Elves were a relatively tall race, it could be said that they were taller than most of the humanoid races. Their physique was neither too large nor too small and could also be placed into the average category.

However, their whole body was wrapped entirely in a black robe that opened in the front, and because they wore a plague mask reminiscent of a bird's head, even their expression was hidden from view.



The pungent smell of herbal tinctures reminded Caria that these bird-headed figures were Mynoghra's Medics that were recently unlocked by the Clinic's construction and produced at Takuto's orders. As soon as they spotted Takuto, they went down on one knee and showed their king respect.

"Oooh! Why, if it isn't our great king, Takuto Ira!"

"What an inspiration for you to come all the way out here to see us yourself!"

"What a marvelous day this has turned out to be!"

Contrary to their uncanny appearance, the bird-headed Medics were a little too loud and cheerful. It was easy to tell they were exuberant, but their full-body gestures were overly exaggerated, and they spoke several decibels too loud.

Maria instinctively covered her ears. But whether the birdmen understood or cared, they didn't show it because they cried out in even louder, more enthusiastic voices.

"PLEASE ORDER US AS YOU WILL, OUR KING!!!"

The birdmen even struck funny poses in unison.

Takuto was a little baffled by their behavior that was a far cry from the character setting he knew, but he pulled himself together and moved things along.

"At least they have ample motivation," Atou observed. *"For that, they pass as tentatively qualified to be your vassals, King Takuto."*

"I had them spawned just in case, but they've been idling away the time with nothing to do, so I thought they were perfect for the job," Takuto explained.

"With their abilities, they are certainly fit to serve as escort. Oh, I see now. It's those unique abilities of theirs that make them perfect for this, right?"

Atou and Takuto continued to casually consult each other in front of the birdmen lying prostrate at their feet.

"Exactly. Their special abilities are tricky to use, but they'll be effective in Phon'kaven, if necessary."

“It’s not like we’re sending them to fight, and they have enough Strength to at least defend themselves.”

As the twins watched their king and his confidant talk, they wondered what kind of abilities these birdmen possessed. However, it appeared Takuto had no intention of explaining it as he told Atou to give his orders to the Medics.

“I hereby convey upon you the words of King Takuto Ira. Escort these two girls to the town of Dragontan and thoroughly observe their nation’s culture and current affairs.”

“O-OOOOOHHHHH!”

When they heard Takuto’s words through Atou, the birdmen displayed their joy with their exaggerated poses.

As Medics, they currently had a lot of time on their hands. They spent their days without wielding their powers despite hastening to come work for the King of Ruin. They appreciated that peace-loving Mynoghra’s policies made it so there wasn’t a need for Medics, but it was a bittersweet feeling for them too.

But their days of inactivity ended today.

It was finally time for them to be of use to the King—and for a mission that the King of Ruin and Hero Atou came to give them in person. What joy and excitement that brought them as units of Mynoghra!

Trembling with anticipation, the three birdmen sprung to their feet and spread their arms out, unable to contain their joy.

“CULTURE!”

“OBSERVATION!”

“AND ESCORT!”

“WHAT *HUEMANLIKE* ACTIONS!” the three crowed together in such a loud voice, they seemed to be expressing all their enthusiasm for their grand quest with it.

Their cries echoed off all the walls in the Clinic’s relatively tiny waiting room. Cringing from the sharp, ear-piercing sound, Takuto nodded rapidly to convey he understood and wanted them to calm down.

“THANK YOU FOR ASSIGNING US THIS HONORABLE MISSION, KING OF RUIN! ALL OF US *HUEMAN*! WE WILL PERFECTLY ACCOMPLISH THIS TASK AS HUEMANS, LIKE HUEMANS! HUEMANS!”

“FOR WE ARE EXEMPLERY HUEMANS!”

“WE EXCEL AT WORKING LIKE HUEMANS!”

But Takuto’s desire for them to quiet down was utterly lost in all their excitement at being assigned their first mission. It was at this point that he started to question his own plan.

“*Um*, Your Majesty...” Caria looked at him worriedly.

“W-Will they be okay...?”

“*Hueman*...?” Maria parroted the birdmen.

“Th-This is very worrying. What should we do, King Takuto?”

What should I do? Takuto groaned when Atou asked him that. He was as troubled about it as they looked. So he decided to make slight modifications to his original strategy.

“You three...”

“YES?! PLEASE GIVE US ANY ORDER, OUR KING!!!” they chirped back at him.

“You are to serve under the command of these two girls.”

Takuto was originally planning on setting them up as the main commanders for this mission, since they possessed some ability to think and discern things for themselves. But their eccentric and disconcerting behavior made him make a 180-degree change to his plans by appointing the twins to a position where they could put a stop to the Medics’ craziness.

“Listen to everything they say.”

His command included his unsaid wish of “Please don’t do anything unnecessary.”

“IT’S ONLY NATURAL FOR US TO OBEY THE ORDERS OF OUR SUPERIORS, FOR WE ARE HUEMANSSS!!!”

Unfortunately for Takuto, not only did his implied meaning not get through to

them, it seemed to rouse them further.

Most of the time, people who give overly enthusiastic replies don't listen and are bound to make a huge blunder during a key moment. Takuto broke out in a sweat as he remembered how the head nurse, who used to look out for him during his past life, often complained about people like that.

He was still concerned. All he felt at the moment was worry.

Almost every unit in *Eternal Nations* has a character profile. However, it became a newly established fact in this world that Takuto wouldn't know a unit's personality or idiosyncrasies until he actually produced or spawned them. Like the Long-legged Bug who seemed to get a kick out of interfering with Takuto and Atou's romantic moments, there were plenty of annoying character traits that became apparent outside of the game.

In any case, since he gave the order as King, he should behave accordingly. At the very least, continuing to doubt them before the job even started called his judgment as King into question, and it was disrespectful to his loyal vassals. Besides, there was a good chance they could do their job well without causing any problems.

Judging someone based on their appearance made him a failure as a person, not just a king. Thus, Takuto decided to do something that would make them happy as an apology. In other words, he wanted to reward them in advance. If he were being honest, he still had some uncertainty about what a unit belonging to the evil civilization of Mynoghra could possibly want, but he'd a pretty good hunch when it came to these three.

"Okay, it's a bit early, but I have a reward for you."

The birdmen Medics visibly trembled at his words. Their minds seemed to struggle to process this unexpected turn of delightful events. Takuto let some of the tension out of his shoulders when they didn't start shouting his ears off again and pointed to each of them.

"Ichiro, Jiro, Saburo," he said, listing off their names as his index finger moved from one to the next. "I give you all the names of humans."

The King personally rewarded them with names.

“O-OOOOOHHHHH!”

Shrill cries of glee rose from the birdmen.

Takuto couldn't endure it any longer and had to cover his ears, but he chuckled at the fact they reacted exactly how he'd expected.

Normal units in *Eternal Nations* don't have unique names. They're just referred to by their race or class and used as expendable pawns. But, in this world, units had a will, albeit a distorted one, and an awareness of being an individual.

The unit produced today will not be the same as the unit produced tomorrow. Thus, Takuto acknowledged their individuality and gave them a reward that encouraged their self-awareness. Most of all, they were obsessed with being human.

If anything, they should be delighted and not upset if he gave them human names like a parent. It's with that thought that he bestowed them with the names he put quite a bit of thought into, but...

The act was more meaningful than Takuto anticipated, giving them joy and happiness that was out of this world.

“OH, ICHIRO! LET US COMPLETE THIS MISSION FLAWLESSLY AS HUEMANS!”

“OF COURSE, JIRO!”

“DON'T LEAVE OUT SABURO HERE!”

“OR MARIA!”

They immediately began calling out their own names and fussed over it in deafening voices. Worse yet, Maria seemed to have been touched by their antics because she joined the noisy group. She happily mingled with them, imitating their loud voices and the funny poses they took.

This was the moment Takuto's anxiety quadrupled, and their potential as capable subordinates plummeted in his mind.

“WAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!”

“Wahaha!”

The three birdmen placed their hands on their hips and guffawed, with Maria joining in at the last second.

Takuto used his indomitable will to push the word “WORRIED” out of his mind. Instead of letting worry dominate his thoughts, he looked to Caria for help.

The twins were put in charge of this recon mission at the last second. Now that the older sister had joined the birdmen in their insanity, the younger sister was his last hope to keep the lot of them in check. Takuto decided to bet everything on the hope that Caria would show her potential as a leader here and miraculously rein this rambunctious group in.

Although her dismay was clearly visible on her scarred face, the girl seemed to make up her mind to meet Takuto’s silent expectations as she stepped up to the bizarre trio plus her sister.

“Excuse me...” she started.

“HOW CAN WE HELP YOU, MY LADY?!”

Three bird heads turned completely around at an angle human heads most definitely couldn’t turn. Caria let out a tiny “Eep!” at their creepy movements but mustered every ounce of courage to confirm if she could manage them.

“Do you know how to behave yourselves?” she asked. “*Um*, well, we are planning to meet with their mayor if we can. Are you capable of not harming Mynoghra’s reputation? Will you listen to Big Sista and me?”

“OF COURSE, MY LADY!!!” they trilled.

“OF COURSE!” Maria mimicked them.

“O-Okay, then first things first...can you please refrain from being so loud?”

“YES, MY LADY!!”

“Yessie, yes!”

Their reply was perfect, but there was nothing persuasive about the way they delivered it.

Caria’s stomach cramped. It was her first time experiencing a stress-induced

stomachache.

“K-King Takuto, with all due respect, I am extremely worried about them...”

Even Atou pitied the girls enough to speak on their behalf.

She didn't have to point it out—he painfully agreed with her. After conveying that to Atou through his gaze, he crouched down to eye level with Caria and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. He wanted to confirm one last time with the only person who'd actually take responsibility for the mission and would very likely be cleaning up after the others.

“...C-Caria, think you can handle it?”

“I-It will probably...be all right... I'll, *uh*, do my bestest.”

Caria was trembling, and her eyes were filled with tears. Regardless of what she said, her physical reaction screamed “It's impossible for me!”

But the plan was already underway. It would be difficult to call off the birdmen trio plus their mockingbird follower, who were still cackling with obnoxious laughter. Not to mention it was Caria who strongly pushed to be appointed to the Dragontan Recon Mission. Besides, these birdbrained Medics were the only units suitable for their escort, as uncomfortable as it was.

Both Takuto and Caria were in a position where they couldn't call the whole thing off anymore.

“I'm counting on you. Really counting on you,” Takuto stressed. “I will take responsibility for everything, but if worse comes to worst, you might get stuck cleaning everything up as it happens... You have my permission to do what you have to...”

He granted her full discretionary power in case anything happened so she could cover up for any mistakes the other four made. Takuto inwardly wept for the girl, thinking this was probably the last thing he should levy on her.

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty... I-I will do my very bestest...to use all my limited ability to prevent them from causing any trouble.”

Caria also internally wept for her fate. Her first mission was set at a ridiculously high difficulty level. She never imagined their empire had such

problematic citizens, much less that her beloved older sister was among their ranks.

“W-Well...” Atou called out to Caria with a sympathetic look. “Please consult me if anything is troubling you. You still have some time before you have to depart, so I’m here for you, whatever you may need.”

“Thank you so much, Lady Atou.”

Atou’s kindness melted away some of the tension creating knots in Caria’s stomach.

“HUEMAN!!!”

“Hueman!”

But when she saw the birdmen trio plus her sister join hands and merrily dance in a circle, she grimaced and pressed a hand against her stomach.



Clinic

Building

Recovery of all units stationed in this city +10%

Removes the negative status effects of common Diseases

Unlocks Unit: **Medic**

The Clinic is a facility that increases the Resilience of all units stationed in the same city. It can also remove some negative effects of Flu, Fatigue, Poison, Paralysis, and similar common Diseases.

Chapter 7: Mayor

ANTELISE Antik, the female Elf who served as mayor of Dragontan, was at the end of her rope as she sat at her desk covered in unorganized piles of parchment and liquor bottles.

“I can’t take it *ANYMOOOOOOOOORE!* I don’t *WANNAAAAAAAAAAAAA* work!”



Antelise leaned back in her chair as she shouted her complaint and slammed her hand down on her desk in protest of her workload. Her wavy blonde hair and voluptuous breasts violently shook with the movement. She threw a childish tantrum despite being well into adulthood. This wasn't a look fit for a mayor.

"I mean, why the Saints do I have to work this much?! And here I thought I'd finally gotten myself some freedom after getting out of El-Nah's draconian forest! I thought I'd finally strike gold and get myself a handsome husband who's so in love with me, I'd never have to work another day in my life! I thought I'd raise a family while living it up all lovey-dovey! GO UP IN FLAMES WORLD! AND TAKE ALL THEM DAMN COUPLES WITH YOU! RIGHT NOW!"

She glared at the paperwork with dark bags under her eyes as she griped. She ran her hand over the desk until it bumped into a bottle, which she snatched up and downed in one go. Anyone could tell she was in a foul mood and that she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep.

But who could blame her for letting off some steam?

The array of circumstances bearing down on Dragontan, especially concerning the abnormal Barbarians attacking the town and the various procedures and sanctions accompanying it, had succeeded in wearing her mental fortitude down to its limits. As if she didn't already have enough on her table, she was notified by the capital about a new nation. This news was particularly troubling.

Mynoghra, the Empire of Ruin.

When she was informed that Phon'kaven had become allies with this nation said to be ruled by an evil god, she thought someone was yanking her chain. It sounded like the kind of stuff the boys in the office would take from some cheap novel.

But the moment she realized the information coming from Staff Holders Pepe and Tonukapoli was the cold, hard truth rather than a bad joke, her brain, which was so smart it'd gotten her appointed as mayor, instantly calculated the amount of pressure and work about to be thrown onto her and despaired.

There was no denying that Dragontan's lacking defenses was of urgent

concern to Antelise. She'd taken every possible measure to protect the town, sometimes even getting her hands dirty. Although she hailed from the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals, she'd lived in Phon'kaven long enough to consider it her second home. She had plenty of friends and attachments there.

She intended to do whatever it took to protect this country and town, and she understood she needed to be broad-minded enough to associate with various races and types of people to be a leader. However, she never expected the Staff Holders, the highest decision-makers in the country, to join hands with the forces of darkness. Nor did she expect those evil forces to move in a stone's throw away from her town.

"If that wasn't bad enough, they're telling me to work with the forces of darkness to defend Dragontan?! Whaaaaat the Saints?! Are they sane?! Am I supposed to invite them over for a friendly chat? I mean, what do the forces of darkness even eat?! Can I serve them tea and cookies? They'd better not ask for Human liver and blood!"

If they had allied with another nation, such as the Holy Kingdom of Qualia or the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals, Antelise would have been calmer about their decision. The forces of good may be inflexible and discriminatory, but at least they could still see eye to eye on some things.

But she'd never seen or heard of a nation run by the forces of darkness. She did actually read about it once in some book recording something that had happened hundreds of thousands of years ago. It didn't even have as much merit as a fairy tale at that age.

Being mayor was by no means an unimportant position. There was no way to tell the impact Antelise's mistakes might have on negotiations with their new allies. This wasn't the kind of situation where they could make up for mistakes by firing her and apologizing. Worst-case scenario, her actions may lead to a war between nations.

Antelise wanted nothing to do with some farce that'd lead to people's deaths just because she served the wrong tea cakes. She was desperately trying to gather more information, but she was left without a clue as Staff Holder Tonukapoli promptly returned to Crescent Moon, and Staff Holder Pepe was

meandering wherever he wanted without getting caught by her.

This impasse was causing her to steadily increase the amount of liquor she was tossing back. She used to drink in secret while at work, but now she was brazenly taking swigs at her desk. There wasn't a single person in town hall who'd call her out for it.

"Excuse me, Mayor Antik—"

"What?! You gotta problem, buddy?!"

Someone had dared speak to Antelise while she was on the verge of a complete mental breakdown. Pushed over the edge by his interruption, she slammed her liquor bottle on the desk and shouted at him. When she looked up and saw the wide-eyed look on the wolf Beastman guard's face, she hastily tried to gloss over her outburst.

"E-Ehehehe. Sorry for shouting. Do you need something?"

"Some people would like a meeting with you."

"Huh? Who could that be? Do they have an appointment?"

"Doesn't seem like it."

"Too bad then. Send them away. My time is more valuable than gold dust. Make sure to tell them not to bother me again unless they want to die."

The mask she'd donned to look more professional slid right off. She stood by the insistence no meeting should waste her time when she was already under so much stress. Dragontan was in a state of emergency, and Antelise was the most important person working at the forefront of the problem.

It'd be one thing if things were normal, but she didn't have the time to spare on insignificant meetings during a crisis. Besides, not making an appointment in advance meant it was either someone who was going to be a pain in her butt or who had a pain in the butt reason for being there. In that case, turning them away was the best option, and while her word choice was a violent one, her decision wasn't wrong.

Except, the Wolfman guard didn't budge even after she handed down her verdict. Instead of leaving, he deferentially explained who their visitors were in

a way that wouldn't further incite Antelise's wrath.

"Er, well...are you sure you want to do that when they claim to be envoys from Mynoghra?"

"Why didn't you tell me *that* sooner?!" Antelise exploded. "That changes everything!"

She jumped to her feet, knocking over her chair and scattering documents and a whole lot of liquor bottles, and stormed past the Wolfman guard.

The guard was left standing alone in what looked like a disaster site after a storm blew through.

"She's a beautiful and incredibly talented woman, but that personality ruins it all..."

The guard heaved a sigh as he glanced sideways at the mayor's office, which looked more like a hoarder's trash heap.



THE Spirits are terrified.

Antelise was facing Mynoghra's envoys, who'd been shown to the reception room. The first thing she sensed in their presence was the distorted atmosphere and the Spirits' terror. As an Elf, she had a naturally high affinity with Spirits, which was further bolstered by her personal aptitude. So she could sense their abnormal reaction through the basic Spirit Artes she'd learned.

We're completely and utterly screwed. Why did the Staff Holders join forces with these abominations? Are they outta their minds?

Antelise put on a welcoming smile as if she were genuinely pleased by a visit with a long-term friend she hadn't seen in years without letting her true thoughts show.

"Welcome to the town of Dragontan. I'm the Mayor, Antelise Antik."

"Thank you very muchest for meeting with us. I'm Caria Elfuur of Mynoghra. This is my Big Sista, Maria Elfuur."

"I'm the big sister."

Two young girls were sitting across from Antelise, with three creepily dressed people standing at attention behind them, showing that the girls were the ones in charge. She'd normally raise an eyebrow at the odd power dynamic at play, but she was more concerned about figuring out the hidden meaning there.

Dark Elves... I'd heard that Mynoghra had taken them in as citizens, but what role do these girls play?

Antelise was struck by a desire to commune with the Spirits to analyze her guests. But she couldn't risk trying anything funny as long as she didn't know what kind of magic or sorcery Mynoghra's envoys could use. People of all ages and nations have done foolish things throughout time that have threatened their standing. Antelise had learned much from their mistakes and disciplined herself not to commit the same follies.

I need to be especially cautious of the three in the back. I've heard stories of a Dark Elf assassination brotherhood...could they be them?

Either way, just standing there staring at them wasn't going to get her any information. Judging them solely on their looks was just asking for trouble later. Thus, Antelise only noted her first few visual observations before steeling herself to speak with them further, apprehension about not knowing who or what she was dealing with eating away at her all the while.

"I apologize for not being able to provide satisfactory hospitality due to the suddenness of your visit. We are still in the middle of preparing our side of things..."

"That's quite all right."

"Righty-right."

Although it was an act that could sully Phon'kaven and Dragontan's reputation, Antelise apologized for her inadequacies without hesitation. She did so to drive home the point that they'd come without warning and to have an excuse to fall back on should anything go wrong later.

Hmm... How should I interpret their reaction? These are some weird sisters. They likely have a story... Wait, the Elfuur Sisters? Didn't Lady Tonukapoli say something about the Elfuur Sisters?

Antelise was having a hard time getting a read on them, when she suddenly remembered hearing their names mentioned by Tonukapoli as people requiring special treatment. Yes, Tonukapoli had said the Elfuur Sisters were being trained as the future leaders of their country under the direct tutelage of their king—

“Kaaahhkkk!!”

“Wh-Whatever is the matter, Miss Mayor?!”

“Meow-meow?”

Mayor Antelise strangled out an unladylike cry that sounded an awful lot like a cat throwing up a hairball. The two girls stared at her in shock. The older sister blinked at her and the younger sister gaped.

“M-My throat was just a little itchy, is all, ahahaha...”

As she frantically tried to throw the clearly worried girls off her trail, Antelise screamed inside her head for the hundredth time that day.

They're the top of the food chain! What are such big shots doing here?!

The senses Antelise had honed over years as mayor were setting off alarm bells in her head. If they were receiving guidance directly from their king, then they were guaranteed to at least be heading up some government office or another once they got older. It was quite possible they'd even be appointed as ministers or chancellors in the future.

They were important enough to be treated as state guests.

The worst part of all was the fact they were being mentored by their king. That proved how much he favored them. Antelise even started to suspect Mynoghra's King had a thing for little girls, given how young the sisters looked. If that was true, this was no laughing matter—she was *royally* screwed.

There was no telling what damage would come if anything happened to these girls if their king's affections delved into the romantic, which would make him all the more attached and obsessed with them.

This was the King of Ruin she was dealing with. These girls were cherished by a being legends said would someday destroy the world. The world was bound to

be destroyed the day after anything happened to them. At the very least, Dragontan would be no more.

Antelise had a habit of shouting “GO UP IN FLAMES WORLD! AND TAKE ALL THEM DAMN COUPLES WITH YOU!” But she suddenly didn’t feel that way when she came face to face with the sparks that could literally set the world on fire.

When it came down to it, she was hosting live bombs. It was unknown where or what the fuse was to set them off.

Antelise’s smile twitched at the corners when it dawned upon her that the people who could influence the fate of her nation were sitting in her reception room. Things had already gone beyond her capacity to handle.

I mean, these aren’t the kind of people you send to a lowly town! Come on! Send us a typical civil official instead! Or is this supposed to be some kinda threat? Like “I’ve sent you my precious ones, so you know what fate awaits you if you treat them wrong,” kinda deal? Is it?

The cute girls were giving her baffled looks.

Antelise didn’t even know what they came for. She’d tried to feel them out with the few sentences they’d exchanged so far, but that failed horribly. She didn’t even know what move she should make next as mayor. All she could do was immerse herself in internal griping.

And if that isn’t bad enough, they’re DARK ELVES! They’ve gotta be hostile toward Elves! Talk about the worst match-up in history! I left that damn, antiquated forest behind because I hated all the stuffy rules, so why did the biggest landmine follow me here?! Agggggggghhhhhhhh!

Both girls were Dark Elves, the sworn enemies of Elves. And they were still younglings who couldn’t be reasoned with, not to mention they had the affections of the childlover King of Ruin. It was easy to speculate that one mistake could lead to international trouble, so Antelise was hesitant to say anything without carefully weighing her words.

Meanwhile, the girls also seemed to be searching for the right thing to say. Maybe they were waiting for Antelise to start the conversation.

It was a soft-spoken male voice that suddenly shattered the tension in the

room as each side tried to get a feel for the other.

“My lady, may I speak?”

It was one of the three people standing behind the girls like guards who’d spoken up.

“Oh, sure. What is on your mind, Mr. Jiro?”

With the girl’s permission, the person gave a slight nod, bowed deeply to Antelise, and then spoke.

“The reason for our visit this time is for nothing more than to take Staff Holder Pepe up on his invitation to come over and play sometime soon. In other words, the young ladies here are essentially students who have come to learn what it is like to live in another country, per Master Pepe’s kindness.”

“O-Oh? Is that so?”

Antelise couldn’t have hoped to hear anything better than that. He’d given her something to work with amid this uncertain meeting. Now she had an idea of where the conversation was headed. If nothing else, it wasn’t going to end with, well, the world literally ending or Antelise’s execution just yet.

“Yes, Mayor Antik,” the guard responded. “Requesting a meeting with you was also just a preliminary step to help facilitate future exchanges between our people. We apologize for taking up your valuable time, but we hope you don’t interpret our presence as anything more than just wanting to introduce ourselves to you.”

“This is just supposed to be...an introduction?” Antelise asked dubiously.

“As you can see, the young ladies here are no more than children. They are still learning about politics, so we hope you will refrain from consulting them about political matters.”

Upon closer inspection, it appeared Mynoghra was also unsure of how to approach Dragontan. Antelise probably wouldn’t have been this tense if she’d known they were only there to make preliminary introductions. She wished they’d told her sooner, but if the girls sitting in front of her were favored by the King, then there was likely a lot the guards had to put up with. At least, that was

what Antelise deduced from the explanation given by the person wearing a bizarre mask shaped like a bird's head.

"Once again, I hope you will recognize that this is an informal meeting," he stressed.

"Wonderful! Then you didn't come here to make any arrangements concerning our alliance?"

"Indeed. The person officially in charge of those matters will arrive at a later date, so please just view us as tourists."

Thank the Spiritssss! I had a little too much to drink today, so I definitely wanted nothing to do with any formal talks!

Antelise wanted to raise a glass to them. She felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She could get away with making a few mistakes during an informal setting, and Mynoghra's people seemed to be taking the considerate route. At the very least, they were showing a willingness to talk rather than making one-sided demands. That left her with plenty of options with how to handle them.

The man with a bird mask nodded with satisfaction when he sensed Antelise's relief and the softening tension and quietly turned to the girls.

"Isn't that right, my ladies?"

"Absolutely, positively right!"

"Righty-right!"

So, this is essentially a work-study session for two precocious little girls who bit off more than they could chew? Well, it's asking a bit much to expect these kids to effortlessly come up with and deliver the same lines their birdman bodyguard did. It's no wonder they fell silent! Gee, they had me worried!

"I'm glad to hear that," Antelise said. "I was on pins and needles thinking I might offend you because we hadn't prepared a proper reception party."

"Don't be. We are the ones who must apologize for visiting you without a prior appointment," Caria said with adult-like formality. "Thank you very much for speaking with us on short notice."

“Righty-right!” Maria added.

“My, you girls are so polite and courteous! Your country must be proud to have such dependable young ladies.”

Tranquility instantly filled the reception room. At last, they could converse with each other like proper allies without being on edge. If nothing else, the town of Dragontan wasn’t destined to go up in flames with all its couples before the King’s wrath.

Still, I better be extra careful not to upset these girls. He went out of his way to do all this to help them study... It’s settled, the King cares deeply about them. He must have a thing for little girls...

Antelise kept her disrespectful opinion to herself, a skill required of all politicians. Takuto would’ve denied her accusations to the bitter end if he’d known what she was thinking, but unfortunately for him, anyone would’ve come to the same conclusion about him, given the circumstances.

Boy, it’s pretty relaxing being around them now! I’ll go ahead and become their friend and teach them all sorts of stuff. Things regarding the Barbarians should go smoother if these girls mediate for me when the real official comes—I knew it, I’m a genius mayor! I can totally handle an evil nation.

Antelise was as merry as a grig now. She decided to pop open a bottle of liquor she’d stored away for a special occasion to treat herself for a job well done later. Meanwhile, the twins felt ashamed of their inadequacy for not handling the conversation properly, and they envied Antelise for how capable she was.

Both sides had the complete opposite emotional reaction to their concluded meeting.

“With that said, it’d be a disgrace of my role as mayor of Dragontan to just send you on your way. Please leave the details of your stay, such as arrangements for your inn, to me. If you like, I could have someone give you a grand tour later. How about it?”

“Do you really, truly mean it?! We thought it’d be too much to ask of you, Miss Mayor, but since you offered, we’d be ever so happy to take you up on it!”

“Happy to take you up on it!”

Just like that, the twins’ first time serving as envoys had safely come to a close.



Antelise Antik

Person

Race: Elf

Empire: Phon'kaven

Role: Mayor of Dragontan



Description

~Gifted with intelligence, beauty, and a cheerful, magnanimous personality, Antelise is the most trusted and most manless mayor of all time.~

Antelise is a mayor belonging to the multiracial empire of Phon'kaven. As the daughter of one of El-Nah Alliance of Elementals' clan chiefs, she absconded because she didn't like the man her father chose to be her husband. She moved from town to town after that, eventually settling down in Dragontan.

Despite being a heavy drinker and a free spirit, her innate talents secured her the role of mayor.

Her dream is to become a wonderful wife. It should be noted that Phon'kaven's Staff Holders consider her terrible marriage chances a highly classified secret.

ANTELISE showed up later that day as their tour guide. Caria was a little surprised that the mayor would take on that job herself, but given the situation both nations found themselves in, it was the appropriate response. Just as Mynoghra took steps not to offend Phon'kaven, Antelise also couldn't entrust her state guests to just anyone. At the end of the day, showing them around herself was the safest option, and she gleefully tossed her mayoral duties aside for this justified excuse to skip work.

"And there you have it!" Antelise trumpeted. "As someone who knows every corner of this town, I can give you the best grand tour! Ask me about anything you would like to know!"

"You're so peppy, Miss Antik," Caria observed.

"Oh, come now, cutie. You can just call me Antelise!"

"You smell of hooch," Maria observed.

"*Ehehe*, this is the real me!" Antelise giggled. "We're together for an informal occasion. What's the point of keeping things tense? The real trick to work-life balance is to skip work in moderation. This is advice from your big sister here, okay? But don't tell anyone about the booze."

After their initial meeting, Antelise had spoken with the twin girls enough to form a friendly rapport. Since she had already measured the amount of distance she needed to keep from them, Antelise determined it was fine for her to be herself, and so she immediately kicked her mask of professionalism to the side.

"By the way, are you sure you are okay being around me? Don't you have any qualms with me being an Elf?"

She threw down the hard question the second she decided to stop playing coy. This was an extremely delicate subject, but she purposely brought it up in this way. If she didn't figure out how they felt about it early on, it could lead to conflict between them later. Antelise had no issues with them being Dark Elves, but there was no guarantee they felt the same.

"Nope. There are good Elves and bad Elves too. Besides, Big Sista and I came as Mynoghra's envoys. We aren't going to judge you because you are an Elf."

“Uh-huh!”

“That is very admirable of you both...”

“Does it not bother you, Miss Antelise?”

“I’m an Elf who ran away from home. I actually have Dark Elf friends, too, so it doesn’t bother me one bit.”

“You have Dark Elf friends? Introduce us! Pretty please!”

“I’d be happy to. They live in Crescent Moon, so it might take some time to get word to them, but I’ll introduce you someday soon.”

They chatted at ease with each other. Caria was especially happy to obtain information on other Dark Elves without trying to. Since they lived in Phon’kaven’s capital, they probably couldn’t meet up until the Barbarian problem was solved, but she was excited that this was good news she could report back to her esteemed King.

And yet, contrary to the delight of her younger sister, Maria was giving Antelise the evil eye.

“...What’s gotten into you, Big Sista?”

Maria should be as open-minded about Elves as her little sister, and even if she had some reservations, she was smart enough not to let it show. So Caria was at a loss as to why her sister was acting the way she was. But the answer was revealed when Maria pointed...to the top-heavy blonde Elf’s well-endowed chest.

“Big boobs are the enemy!” Maria exclaimed.

“Oh, you’re right,” Caria agreed. “I’m a tad envious.”

Antelise’s big breasts seemed to be a bigger problem than her race.

They really are HUGE, Caria thought as she ogled Antelise, who hastened to appease the girls.

“You girls are still growing. You have plenty of time to get bigger, so don’t lose hope.”

“The thing is, Dark Elves as a race don’t have big breasts,” Caria admitted

sadly. “Every woman we’ve ever known has dreamed of getting bigger only to have those hopes eternally dashed.”

“Everybody in our clan is flatter than a board,” Maria lamented.

Yes, that was why Maria identified Antelise as an enemy, and Caria cast her envious looks.

“Th-There are a lot of complications that come with being big-breasted.”

“A luxury only somebody who has them can complain about.”

“So sad...”

Most Dark Elves have a genetic disposition toward smaller chests, while Elves are more likely to have large breasts. Nothing can be done about genetics, and the twins were well aware that the Minister of Domestic Affairs’ secret attempts to make her breasts bigger hadn’t paid off at all.

The future was bleak, and their plight could never be understood by the well-endowed.



“...**BY** the way, what kind of food do you usually eat?” Caria asked Antelise while being shown around the town’s various facilities. She’d never admit that staring at the older woman’s melons made her think of food.

Dragontan’s streets couldn’t be called pretty by any standard. Clay houses made of a mixture of stone, clay, and dried grasses made up the majority of the buildings built evenly spaced from each other.

The climate in the Dark Continent differed greatly depending on the location, and it seemed like it didn’t rain much where Dragontan was located, draining the land of vitality. No matter how Caria looked at it, she didn’t think this was an environment where crops grew in abundance, so she wondered what the inhabitants usually ate.

“We live in a wasteland, after all. It’s hard to get anything to grow here like it does to the north. We mostly live off of grains such as wheat and millet, although the yield is small. Also, we have an endless supply of edible cacti, but I hate the flavorless stuff.”

They had some food production capacity. From the sound of it, while their options weren't the best, they were getting by all right from a supply point of view.

"We also make cheese from dairy farms," Antelise continued. "And during times of celebration, we roast up one of the henbel birds that grow nice and plump with minimal feed. You can see one there."

Caria looked in the direction Antelise pointed to see plucked birds hanging from several different eaves. Apparently, this was the shopping district.

"By the way, cactus cheese, which is cheese baked on top of a slice of edible cactus, is supposed to be a specialty of this town, but I don't recommend it because it tastes horrendous."

The owner of the store next to the one selling the birds shot Antelise a killer glare. When Caria spotted the piles of cheese and cactus beside him, she found herself feeling kind of impressed by Antelise's ability to say what was on her mind without caring who heard.

"M-Mynoghra has lots and lots of tasty food. We already agreed to a trade deal, so I hope you'll try it when you get the chance, Miss Antelise."

Getting the feeling a fight might break out between the store owner and Antelise if she left them be, Caria quickly grabbed Antelise's hand and changed the topic as she dragged her away.

"Did you say *tasty* food?! Count me in! But your big sister here is more interested in Mynoghra's *al-co-hol* options," Antelise said with a lilt.

"Our liquor is extra tasty," Maria chimed in.

"His Majesty told us we can't have any, but all the adults who drink it look up at the sky and cry out, 'is this heavenly nectar?'" Caria said, mimicking the adults.

"Heavenly nectar?! Spirits smite me! I need to start saving up to buy some! *Ahh*, but I need to pay my tab at the tavern first..." Antelise trailed off, hanging her head.

"We'll ask His Majesty to gift you with some Miss Antelise..." Caria vowed.

“OH MY SPIRITS! You precious little angels! Connections make the world, and my booze, go round!”

Antelise was rapidly coming across a whole lot less impressive than when they first met. Caria strove to collect any information she could, all while despairing at the fact that this woman was very likely to cause her stomach to knot too.

Dragontan’s shopping street was deserted because it was late in the evening. Seeing as there wasn’t even much up for sale at the various stores, the town really was impoverished.

Meanwhile, guards were restlessly rushing past them. They were all headed outside town, with visible tension and exhaustion on their faces. Caria planned to ask about the Barbarians and how the town was faring later, but things looked worse than she’d assumed.

“My lady! I bought what you asked for!”

“Thanks.”

Maria seemed to have sent one of the birdmen on an errand without Caria realizing it. The girls actually had ample funds because they’d exchanged the precious metals Takuto had given them for this mission for pocket money. He had also instructed them to randomly buy whatever caught their eye as a part of their investigation. But the girls had planned to do their shopping on the last day so they wouldn’t have to be burdened by the goods.

Yet, Maria had bought something despite what they had decided. She might’ve just grabbed it on a whim, but Caria was curious about what had caught her sister’s interest and tried to take a peek at what she was holding.

“What did you buy, Big Sista?”

“Something good.”

Maria giggled and slid whatever she bought into her pocket as if she were up to no good.



“**OKAY**, girls, I’ll come to pick you up tomorrow morning,” Antelise said.

“Okay! Looking very forward to it!” Caria exclaimed.

“I want meat,” Maria said.

“Hehehe. Then shall we splurge on meat tomorrow? I can count it as a work expense, so I’ll pay!”

“Meat! Meat!”

The twins waved goodbye to Antelise.

Since the five of them were national guests, they were given a small, vacant house managed by Dragontan to stay in. It was fully furnished, so it was the perfect accommodation for them. The twins were genuinely pleased by Antelise’s considerate choice because an ordinary inn would’ve forced them to be wary of being overheard by the other people staying there. Most of all, they were enjoying what felt like their first sleepover.

“Very good work, everyone,” Caria said, clapping her hands together.

Nevertheless, the girls had come to Dragontan under the name and flag of King Takuto Ira. Caria understood this, so she moved things along for them to discuss and examine the day’s events.

“Miss Antelise is a very free-spirited woman, but she was also incredibly kind. As far as her having a hidden agenda—”

“She doesn’t,” Maria asserted without missing a beat.

“If she did, she’s an amazing actress,” Caria agreed.

The birdmen trio hummed in awe of Maria’s confidence. Apparently, the slow older sister possessed an observational ability they did not.

“The townspeople looked more worn to a frazzle than we expected. The soldiers seemed especially frazzled. How did they look to you, Big Sista?”

“Scared,” Maria declared with certainty again and then continued with unusual verbosity. “No food. Scary enemies outside. No help coming. Not knowing what the future holds.”

“That’s something we understand all too well,” Caria said sadly.

Maria could understand the heart—or to be more precise, she could read another person’s emotions. They didn’t know when this ability manifested in

her. But both of the girls remembered having a miserable life because of it.

She intended to keep it forever sealed. Maria had no desire to use this ability that only brought her misery and despair, and Caria had no intention of ever asking her older sister to use it.

It was Takuto who had changed their minds.

Maria decided to use this power again to repay him for healing their tormented hearts and giving them hope and new values to aspire to. And Caria had secretly vowed to support her sister in any way she could.

“UuuUooooOOOOOOOOOOoOOhhHH!!”

“EEK?!”

One of the birdmen broke the moment between the girls with his ungodly shout.

“What’s wrong, Ichiro? It’s not like us to let out such a strange cry.”

“Our little ladies are growing up so fast! I’m moved to bouts of shouting, Jiro!”

“I see! This growth is a picture of HUEMANITY! And it is we Huemans who must support the little ladies in their Hueman growth!”

“Yes, you said it, Jiro! For we are HUEMANS!”

The meeting suddenly derailed into the birdman trio’s usual loud antics. From the bottom of her heart, Caria was grateful that they were given a house to themselves that should have better soundproofing than an inn room.

“What am I to do with these Hueman-lovers?” Caria sighed.

“They were pretty awesome during greeting time, though,” Maria pointed out.

“Ack. You’re right.”

Maria made a valid point. Drawing a complete blank during the meeting with the mayor was entirely Caria’s blunder. Maria had actually tried to assist her younger sister in her moment of plight, but it didn’t amount to much. It was these crazy birdmen who’d offered them the help they needed when they needed it most.

Caria was apprehensive about bringing them at first, but at the end of the day, it was the birdman trio who'd helped the girls instead. Even though she had made up her mind to do anything and everything in her power for the King, she ended up tongue-tied when it really mattered. So, despite heading up this mission, she didn't feel right scolding the birdmen for talking loudly against her orders when they had saved the day.

Except...

"Oh, no, no. We actually just parroted the words His Majesty told us."

The second she felt grateful to them, she wanted to take it back.

"Don't let it get you down! Cheer up. Up! We may be HUEMANS, but even we haven't reached that godly negotiating skill level."

"On the contrary, it's disrespectful to think we could ever reach His Majesty's level. It is proper HUEMAN behavior to accurately convey the King's words as-is."

"Indubitably!"

"Now that's being HUEMAN!"

The birdmen's spontaneous confession came out of nowhere. Why, it was Takuto who'd spoken through them to save the girls in their time of need. Caria's heart was warmed by her king's boundless kindness and his resourcefulness to come up with just the right thing to say to turn the tides.

But learning that made her suddenly question something else.

"Hold on, then what were you three doing all day?" she asked.

If Takuto was the one speaking through them, then did they actually do anything to help?

"*Boo!*" Maria booed her. "It's mean to make them answer that!"

"Huh? I'm the one at fault here? Is that the wrong question to ask?"

Caria couldn't figure out why Maria was scolding her. Meanwhile, the birdman trio was chortling away. All the laughter eased the tension out of Caria's shoulders, and she found herself giggling along with them.

“This really is no different from a sightseeing trip,” Caria said. “Right? Trouble doesn’t really seem to be afoot.”

“We can go home soon.”

A lot had happened, but the day was peacefully coming to a close. They only had two days left of their stay. The rest of their trip was bound to be easier than today, given they had finished meeting and greeting Antelise. As long as they didn’t neglect their investigation, they should complete their mission in a way that satisfied the King.

Caria thought of the day to come as she dove into bed. She wasn’t as big of a glutton as her older sister, but she was also looking forward to enjoying some meat tomorrow too.

But it seemed fate had other plans for them.

“Oh dear, I fear that’s not the case, my ladies.”

“Be ever cautious.”

“Something unsettling is in the air.”

The birdmen abruptly ceased their wild laughter and began warning the girls, who were their superior officers on paper. Caria scrunched up her face in displeasure as she was about to go to sleep with happier feelings.

“The town’s enervation is affecting public order. Things appear to be functioning fine on the surface, but many people were sizing you girls up. There may be kidnappers and dissenters hiding in the shadows.”

“Yes, but you needn’t worry, because if anything should happen, we will put our bodies on the line like HUEMANS to protect you girls!”

“We will do exactly that!”

The birdman trio rarely listened to Caria and would frolic about with Maria whenever they got the chance. But they were terrifyingly skilled and undoubtedly King Takuto Ira’s vassals. With that in mind, she needed to take their warning to heart, especially since they never joked or fooled around when it came to anything regarding Mynoghra’s national interests.

Caria needed to report this news back to Takuto posthaste. She also needed

to be more aware of her surroundings and potential danger from now on. She had to get word about the deteriorating public order back to the troops that were going to be dispatched for the combined defense operations in the near future too.

“Here.”

As Caria was writing down what she needed to report in the notebook she’d pulled from her pocket, Maria pulled something out of her pocket and waved it in front of her.

“What’s this, Big Sista?”

“Grass.”

“...*Grass*?”

This was likely what she’d sent one of the birdmen to buy during the afternoon and stashed in her pocket without letting Caria see it. Caria closely examined it, since her sister had shoved it in her face as if to say take a closer look, and then she gasped.

“Is this...Popil Grass? It even has the fruit attached.”

Caria remembered seeing it somewhere before, and she frowned as she recalled its side effects. Curiosity piqued by her grimace, the birdman trio noisily gathered around her.

“Do you know what that is, Lady Caria?”

“...The juice from the Popil Grass fruit gives a strong sense of euphoria and has hallucinogenic effects. It’s also highly addictive,” she explained.

“Oh, it’s a drug then. You mustn’t contaminate yourself with it, Lady Maria. Throw it away.”

“Away!”

Maria tossed the Popil Grass onto the floor. Caria scooped it up and examined the condition it was in.

“It’s in surprisingly good condition without any bug damage. Somebody must be cultivating it.”

“Someone is distributing it throughout Dragontan? That’s the opposite of peaceful.”

The birdman trio began consulting each other in an unusually serious manner. Their mission was to escort and guard the twins. It was as if they knew there was no room for tomfoolery as long as they had concerns about the town’s safety.

“There will always be people who only think of themselves no matter the time or place,” Caria remarked, thinking back on that afternoon as she spun the Popil Grass in her fingers.

She didn’t bring it up with the woman, but she noted the dark bags under Antelise’s eyes. She distinctly remembered the cloying scent of alcohol and slight body odor that wafted her way whenever Antelise patted her on the head for one reason or another. She likely hadn’t taken a bath in days. Contrary to her bubbly personality, the state she was in spoke volumes about the crisis her town was in.

All the inhabitants residing in the town of Dragontan were standing at death’s door. They were on the verge of becoming Barbarian fodder. And even amid that crisis, there were still people who lived madly pursuing their desires. That disgusted Caria.

“I know you are probably already prepared for this even if I don’t ask you to be, but please be ready to take on the enemy at any time.”

For the first time ever, the birdmen bowed deeply in response to Caria’s orders. At the same time, they shrugged and started complaining like they were dissatisfied.

“What a bother... I would rather refrain from conflict,” one of the birdmen grumbled.

“But Humans love conflict.”

“They certainly do,” Caria said, wryly agreeing with her older sister’s offhand remark.



IT was early during the next day's tour that the twins learned their wish to spend their last two days without incident would not come true. Oh, it wasn't a big deal—just a Barbarian attack.

Naturally, the mayor couldn't play hooky at a time like this, so she apologized to them for having to call it a day and ran back to town hall looking frazzled. Caria and the rest of Mynoghra's envoy were left standing there with nothing better to do, so she asked Jiro to check on the state of things outside while they explored the residential district.

"We didn't see this area yesterday," Caria noted.

She'd been following after her older sister as she meandered aimlessly from place to place until they finally came across an area they hadn't seen yet. The twins looked around them with curiosity.

The vacant land, which spread out like an empty clearing in the middle of the town, was filled with a kind of refreshing air that made them feel revitalized. When the girls looked down, they noticed gorgeous blue crystals were growing under their feet.

"Wow!" Caria exclaimed, crouching to cautiously stroke it. She yanked back her hand from the surprisingly cold sensation. "It's so pretty..."

"Please look over there, my lady."

One of the birdmen placed his hand on Caria's shoulder and pointed into the distance. She pried her eyes away from the crystals at her feet to see that they covered the entire clearing.

"This is what we call the Dragon Vein Mine," the birdman said. "They tried to cleverly hide it under the earth and sand, but it's not the kind of thing you can conceal easily."

It was a fantastic and magical sight.

If this counted as them concealing it with earth and sand, did that mean innumerable crystals were buried beneath them? What kind of scenery would welcome them if they dug up the mine?

Before Caria knew it, her sister was holding her hand. The twins held hands

and shared in the breathtaking scenery.

The world was full of new things for them to discover.

They felt like they had discovered one of the things their mother used to tell them about during bedtime stories. This was the scenery dreams were made of. They couldn't go home and tell their mother about it anymore, but they knew she was watching over them. And they had King Takuto and a whole city of people they could share their impressions with when they got home. There were so many people waiting for them to come home and who wanted to ask about their trip.

The twins were no longer the same girls who cursed their wretched circumstances and longed for death.

"...Popil Grass grows exceptionally well here," a boorish voice called out to them from behind.

Caria took a deep breath and slowly turned around. She wanted to pummel the man for shattering their special moment but put a lid on her anger because there was no guarantee he had ill intentions. Besides, the girls knew full well that causing any problems here would only sully their king's name.

"I apologize for speaking to you out of the blue. I'm Vesta Kruklain, and I run a trading company in this town. Am I right to assume you are members of Mynoghra's delegation?"

The slender man with nervous-looking, dodgy eyes seemed far from trustworthy. His overly flashy and wasteful attire attested to his profession as a business owner, but the fact he calmly brought up the Popil Grass proved he dealt in shady wares.

Caria made that snap judgment about him and looked to her sister to confirm her suspicions were correct. Maria was staring at the man the same way she might filth piled up on the side of the road, which told Caria everything she needed to know.

This man was likely the person behind the rampant spread of Popil Grass in Dragontan.

"Thank you very muchest for your polite introduction... So? What business do

you have with us?”

“Oh, it was nothing. And the only business a businessman could possibly have is to discuss doing business together.”

“Doing business together?” Caria repeated.

She wanted the obnoxious man to just cut to the chase. She had no intention of listening to anything such a shady man had to say, nor did she have the authority to make a business deal. Whether he knew that or not, the man named Vesta launched into a confident business spiel.

“That’s right. I’ve heard your country possesses outstanding food and goods. I would like you to prioritize doing your trade through my company. Of course, this will be a mutually beneficial transaction. Both sides will benefit immensely from it.”

“...All matters pertaining to the trade agreement are being done at the state level, sir,” Caria said. “You should consult Mayor Antelise about this instead.”

The birdmen maintained their silence, and Maria was entirely uninterested in the man. Caria seemed to be the only person capable of handling the situation, but she had already grown so bored with the businessman that she begrudged her sister for getting to turn her attention back to the stunning crystals.

“A little lady such as yourself might not realize this yet, but that mayor is unacceptable. She doesn’t understand the subtleties of business and has placed worthless regulations that obstruct perfectly good trade.”

“Are you speaking about the Popil Grass?”

Vesta sneered. “As you said, the land where these crystals grow has a mysteriously high crop yield, especially for crops with *unique* effects like Popil Grass.”

“...Go on.”

“Thank you. Our goal is to take control of this town. Under the current mayor, we can only grow so much in secret, but if we can turn this entire clearing into a Popil Grass field, then we would churn out a huge profit.”

“The town will cease to function if you do that,” Caria pointed out.

“We have already taken that into consideration. We plan on selling it to a different country... Like, Qualia for example. We are guaranteed to sell well in such a vast country. So well that even the productivity of this land won't be enough to meet demand.”

“...How does this benefit Mynoghra? What should I tell my king?”

“I have already worked out the details regarding that. You will receive part of the proceeds from the sale of the Popil Grass and complete ownership of the town. Of course, that's on the condition that you make it comfortable for us to do business... I would like to further flesh out the details with you tonight. How about it? You have an open invitation to visit our trading company.”

“Where is it?”

“I drew a map on this paper. The clerk will show you the way if you come to this location after nightfall... Oh, and be sure not to let that drunkard mayor find out.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

Caria accepted the paper Vesta handed her, briefly scanned her eyes over it, and stuffed it into her pocket. Vesta nodded with satisfaction and bowed with a sly smile.

“I'm certain your king will be pleased. I look forward to seeing you tonight. Goodbye until then.”

The man named Vesta turned around and disappeared into a nearby alley that led out of the clearing. As soon as she sensed he was gone, Maria suddenly stood up from where she'd been staring at the crystals with disinterest.

“You going?”

“Obviously not,” Caria said as if any other answer was implausible.

She had feigned interest while planning to completely ignore him. She knew full well that snakes like him would do anything to satisfy their desires, even betray their own family with a smile, and he also had nothing to do with her mission from the King. With all that in mind, he was nothing more than a waste of time. In the one in a million chance he actually had some sort of value, it was

someone else's job to decide that and take appropriate action.

Thus, leaving him be was the only choice. She actually wanted him to be grateful to her for even hearing him out.

"But, my lady, you appeared awfully interested to me?" one of the birdmen said.

"I pretended to be interested to make him go away faster. I wouldn't thoughtlessly walk into that viper's den."

"Well, he did use cheap pick-up lines that hold no value to a lady," the birdman responded.

"Honestly, I can't see it benefiting us much," the second birdman added.

The reason she pretended to be interested was because she thought it'd make him go away faster rather than the argument it'd start if she outright turned him down, and she used it as a chance to gather more information. Sure enough, she learned what designs the man named Vesta had for this area and where his base of operations was located. She'd also obtained the information that some crops grew faster than others around the Dragon Vein Mine. Playing along with his worthless spiel had netted her good results.

"Cary and Big Sista aren't easy women," Caria declared.

"We're *difficult* women."

The twins puffed out their flat chests and gloated.

Aren't they promising?

The birdmen were so impressed by their temporary superior officers, they wished they could serve under them forever.

...When they returned to the inn, the birdmen couldn't resist asking the girls to remain as their superiors, but unlike Maria, who happily agreed, Caria so adamantly refused that their proposal was swept under the rug.

Chapter 8: True Evil

ON their last day in Dragontan, Mayor Antik, who looked as overwhelmed as always, treated the girls to grilled cheese with cured meat while they were souvenir shopping in town to make up for skipping out on her promise the previous day. The twins then spent their last few hours in the town hall's reception room since they'd already finished gathering enough information. They felt a little sad to be leaving so soon.

"Three days went by so fast, huh, girls? Did you enjoy your time in the town of Dragontan?"

"Yes, ma'am. We are ever so grateful to you, Miss Antelise," Caria said.

"It's all good. I made a good connection with you girls, and I have your word that I'll be receiving a fine bottle of booze soon," Antelise chuckled.

"Cary and Big Sista don't have that much power to speak of, but please do come to us if you ever need anything."

"Oh my, that's promising! By the way, how important are you girls, anyway?"

"Hmm...good question. Probably around sixth and seventh place."

"...Excuse me? Doesn't that make you hella important?! *Er*, did I do all right welcoming you? I won't have my head chewed off, will I?"

"You won't get chewed up and spit out," Maria assured.

"We just have a rank with no real authority, so please don't worry," Caria stressed.

There was no clear hierarchy in Mynoghra. However, the unwritten rule was that the closer a person was to the King, the higher their rank, which was why the girls ranked where they did.

Antelise was definitely startled to learn they ranked in the top ten of their country, but she quickly got over it. The more important they were, the more

likely she could go to them to get a problem solved. More importantly, they had formed a relationship that didn't revolve solely around their status. Although their time together was short but sweet, Antelise had grown really fond of the twins.

"Okay, I hate to see you girls go, but it's almost time. Make sure you pass my good wishes along to Mynoghra's King. Be sure to talk about me in a positive light! Oh, and you two are always welcome to come back and play."

"Thank you very muchest. Mynoghra's territory is oozing with miasma, so we can't invite you over, Miss Antelise, but I promise we will definitely come back to play."

"Come to play!" Maria repeated after Caria.

"Thanks. But, *uh*, can you please not say such scary things the same way you'd talk about the weather?" Antelise requested, although she sounded quite happy. If they kept this up, they could talk the rest of the day away. With that in mind, she slapped her thighs and hopped to her feet to draw their meeting to a close.

"Would you mind giving me a bit of time before you go?"

It was Vesta Kruklain who suddenly opened the reception-room doors and soured their goodbye.

"You are...the president of the Kruklain Trading Company. Who gave you permission to come here? Leave. Or I will have you forced out," Antelise warned, leveling him with a glowering look.

Considering the flow of magic activating around them, it wasn't an empty threat. To Antelise, he was a dangerous man who threatened the safety of her town.

Intimidation, assault, rape, murder, fraud—he had dipped his hands into every possible vile crime yet never gave himself away. On the contrary, he'd even created a trading company to commit organized crime with. It was strange that this man who never let himself get caught would brazenly show up now, but Antelise really started to feel the danger when several gruff-looking men followed him into the room.

She didn't care if her head was on the chopping block—she needed to prevent them from harming Mynoghra's envoys no matter the cost. If worse came to worst, she would sacrifice herself to protect the girls. With that determination burning in her chest, she moved into position to protect them.

But then, the most ridiculous statement came from the displeased-looking Vesta.

"Little lady from Mynoghra, care to tell me your response to my offer from the other day? I've been waiting patiently for you ever since."

"Ah, you mean the matter concerning taking over Dragontan and cultivating Popil Grass together?" Caria asked blandly.

"Is that true?!"

Antelise's eyes bulged with shock as she swung her restless, questioning gaze toward Caria. The girl in question raised her teacup to her lips with indifference, and Maria happily munched on the teacakes like a small forest animal.

"It's very true. If I'm not mistaken, the young lady here seemed very interested in my proposal. Just as I was eagerly awaiting pounding out the details with her, I noticed she was going back home without getting in touch with me first, so I went out of my way to come to her instead."

"What happened to town hall's staff and the soldiers on guard?" Antelise asked.

"How cute, you still believe you are in a position to ask questions... Well, not that I mind. All the key players in this town have already come to our side. You might say there were a few who didn't listen to reason, but there are plenty of ways to make even the unreasonable *reasonable*," Vesta said with a spine-tingling laugh.

Showing his true colors here and now meant he'd already laid all the groundwork. A man who never let his tail show was taking open action against Antelise and the town. In other words, he had enough cards on hand to have a sure-fire victory.

Antelise trembled in that knowledge. What gutted her most was the fact that the girls whose company she'd enjoyed so much the past few days had brutally

betrayed her.

Antelise's knees buckled, and she looked pleadingly to Caria. Caria glanced at her and...blinked owlshly.

"Why are you making such a funny face, Miss Antelise?"

"...What?"

"Anyways, I wanted to ask you whether there would be any trouble if we take out these people. I could never face His Majesty if my excess actions here hurt our friendship with Phon'kaven."

Antelise was having a hard time processing Caria's blunt question. But that was enough for her to realize the girls hadn't only not betrayed her but were also still on her side.

"G-Go right ahead!" Antelise responded with her usual vigor. "Take them down however you like! Y-Yeah! You girls have an escort, right? That's a relief, then! These pigs have been making a real mess of my town! It would've been more problematic if they hadn't shown their true colors here, but this is the perfect opportunity to get rid of them!!"

Antelise rapidly regained her confidence and took the opportunity to turn the tides on her enemy. What they were doing counted as a rebellion the moment they stormed town hall with weapons.

They'd reached a point where neither could back down now. A battle was about to begin and would continue until one was defeated, with the winner becoming the ruler of this town. That was the trajectory they were on.

"What a harum-scarum thing for you to say. Did you forget things have only stayed this peaceful because we have maintained this town's public order? You have a lot of audacity, Elf," Vesta said with venom.

"You call threatening weak women and children and then forcing them to pay up for their safety protecting public order? You did whatever the hell you wanted just because we're far from the capital! Do you know how many all-nighters I've had to pull cleaning up after you?!" Antelise shouted, and the band of thugs let out a round of jeers in response.

“You really disappoint me, little lady from Mynoghra. And here I thought we could become good friends with benefits.”

“I never once thought we could be friends,” Caria said outright.

A blue vein bulged in Vesta’s forehead. But he took a deep breath as if to still himself from being provoked and signaled his men to surround the girls.

“You do realize attacking us here is making an enemy of Mynoghra, right? Do you comprehend how stupid that is? I may be but a powerless child, but the King who sent me on this mission is the mighty and powerful King Takuto Ira.”

Indeed, that was the one surprising element to Caria. She never imagined there could be someone so stupid they would consider harming her and her sister. That was why she played along with Vesta when he first approached them and promised to meet up with him later. She’d determined it wouldn’t be a problem to give him the boot when he could never turn his fangs on her.

But things played out differently in reality.

It’s no wonder Caria found herself thinking there were better ways for him to commit suicide than this.

Instead of answering her question, Vesta put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small pouch. He took a tiny vial and a syringe out of the pouch. The elaborate glasswork was a luxury item. It was easy to see just how much money this man possessed and how confident he was in the contents of that little vial.

“What’s that?” Antelise asked.

“Most likely a distilled and refined liquid taken from the Popil fruit,” Caria answered. “I’ve heard that after being injected with it once, you won’t be able to live without it for the rest of your life.”

“Isn’t that a contraband drug?! What’s it doing *here*? And where’d they get a syringe from...? Don’t tell me you used that on the town?!” Antelise fumed.

Antelise had been skeptical of how he could’ve possibly gotten everyone in town hall to join him, but now it finally made sense. It wasn’t realistically possible for him to convince every member of the large staff to switch sides. She thought there was more to it, and it fit if he had somehow found a way to

inject everyone with a drug made of purified Popil Grass. He had created a bunch of convenient pawns intensely addicted to the drug only he could provide.

“Give them a good shakedown, boys. Be sure not to kill them. There’s two, so we just need to make one obedient to us. Then we’ll have that little-girl-loving perverted bastard king Takuto Ira under our finger... Oh, I know. I’ll give you boys the retarded one as a present for a job well done. You can kill the guards behind them. They’re just gonna get in our way.”

The band of thugs drew their weapons. The girls were already outnumbered by the gruff men in the room, yet there were even more outside, and their numbers continued to grow.

Antelise had provoked them earlier, but she couldn’t slow her galloping heartbeat or the nervous sweat dripping down her back.

“Don’t ya worry, darling. One shot, and you’re mine. I’ll take you to heaven, girlies.”

With a sickening sneer coming from his cocksure confidence that victory was his, Vesta swung down his arm, giving his goons the go-ahead.



“...I never thought units with such finicky abilities would be so useful in this world.”

Takuto was busy running things back at Mynoghra’s Palace. He’d finished giving his approval to multiple projects and was enjoying some hot coffee during his break when he muttered that comment aloud.

“What do you mean?”

He was just talking to himself, but Emle was curious to hear more, so Atou stepped up to explain in her king’s place.

“They serve as Medics in Mynoghra. Their primary role is to accompany the troops, healing soldiers who are sick or injured.”

“Oh, yes, I knew that,” Emle said, pushing up her glasses. “They serve a very important role in my opinion... Am I mistaken?”

“You aren’t. They really are important. They just have a...unique set of abilities.”

“Unique...abilities? Like your ability to steal your opponent’s skills, Lady Atou?”

“Correct, although their abilities are nowhere near as strong as mine. Mynoghra’s Medics possess three abilities:

1. Granting a bonus to maintaining the public order in Humanoid-run towns and cities.

2. Granting an increased Attack bonus to Humanoids.

3. Granting an increased Resilience bonus to Humanoids.

Humanoid is used as a general overarching term to refer to the Human race and races closely related to Humans, such as Demi-humans.

Do you see the problem now?”

Emle groaned at her question. Their skills sounded so useful she couldn’t understand why Takuto and Atou called them finicky. With such special abilities, they could contribute much to the empire during peacetime and wartime.

“Well, it’s definitely a con that their abilities are limited to Humanoid races, but I still think they are quite powerful. It’s not a smart move to send Medics into battle, so even if we take the second ability out of the picture, the first and third should still be of constant use...”

If the King dubbed them finicky, then there must be some issue Emle hadn’t figured out yet. Although she knew she’d arrived at the wrong conclusion, Emle still voiced her opinion.

“You have the right idea. The only problem is that it wasn’t plausible for Humanoids to live in the empire of Mynoghra until you guys came along.”

“Oh...”

All of the pieces finally came together in Emle’s mind.

“Mynoghra’s main race, the Homunculus, don’t count as Humanoids.”

Mynoghra’s main race didn’t fall under the Humanoid classification. And even

its Hero, Atou, wasn't remotely Human despite taking that form. In other words, the Medics' abilities couldn't work in their own empire.

Their first ability only granted a bonus to public order in towns and cities run by Humanoids, so it wouldn't do anything for Mynoghra's cities. Moreover, even if they occupied a Humanoid enemy empire, the forces of evil and their units frighten Humanoids, which adds a huge penalty to citizen Happiness and public order.

An increased Attack buff for and against Humanoids also wasn't useful for a Medic unit, so two was out as well.

And increasing the Resilience of Humanoids was worthless when there wasn't a single Humanoid belonging to Mynoghra.

The King wasn't exaggerating when he called them units with finicky abilities nor for seeing their value now that Mynoghra had Dark Elf citizens and an alliance with Phon'kaven. Their abilities came to life only once they could establish friendly relations with Humanoid races.

What whacky and confusing abilities they had. And what in the world were these Medics that they were so specialized in Humanoid races despite serving the forces of evil?

"Lady Atou...erm, what *are* they?" Emle asked Atou in a trembling voice, a chill creeping down her spine.

"They are called Brain Eaters. They are that which adores humanity but failed to become human, so they love all humanoids instead," Atou said with a laugh, giving Emle an indescribable chill.



"MARVELOUS! YOU COULDN'T FIND A BETTER SPECIMEN OF HUEMANITY!"

"INDEED! O, THE FOLLY THAT IS BEING DEVOUT TO ONE'S DESIRES AT THE EXPENSE OF ALL ELSE IS TRULY HUEMAN!"

"WITH THAT SAID, JIRO, SABURO—"

"IF WE WEAR THEIR SKIN, WE CAN BECOME EVEN MORE HUEMAN!!!" the three birdmen screeched in unison, their voices so loud it made everyone want

to cover their ears. They suddenly struck tacky poses like overly excited children and removed their black robes.

“Aaaah!”

Antelise shrieked before anyone else did. After all, she had the best view of what was concealed beneath their robes, vividly driving home just how disturbing of an entity they were.

Asymmetrical, convulsing humanoid bodies. Large, rolling eyes that darted about the room. Shriveled flesh covering limbs bent the wrong way at the joint. Swollen lumps covering the darkened skin and ferocious claws that looked more like dulled blades.

But their grotesque appearance paled compared to one other point they had in common—the birdmen monsters—the Brain Eaters had one particularly revolting trait.

“Wh-What the seven Saints are they?! What the hell are you monsters?!” Vesta thundered, his knees buckling as he realized what exactly the trio was wearing under their robes.

Several of his faint-hearted goons blacked out as soon as they realized what they were looking at too.

Yes, for the birdman trio was wearing—

“WE ARE HUEMANS!!!” they chirped in unison.

—the raw flesh they had skinned off of someone.

“TAKE A GANDER AT OUR BEAUTIFUL, CURVACEOUS BODIES!”

“WE’RE HUEMAN NO MATTER HOW YOU LOOK AT US!”

The pungent smell of herbal fluids filled the room. The human skin, prevented from decaying with herbal preservatives, had been forcibly tied onto the Brain Eaters’ flesh with a string, and the excess skin bounced every time they struck a big pose.

Strangled cries that didn’t even count as screams rose from every corner of the room.

Maria gently hugged Antelise, rubbing her back like she might a child, as the Elf was so terrified by the sight of them, she started hyperventilating.

“It’s okay. Shh,” she soothed. “It’s not scary. They aren’t scary.”

Caria warily eyed the Brain Eaters and thrust her chin out toward the pathetic sacrificial thugs as if to say “What are you waiting for? Finish them already.”

“YOUR SKIN MUST BE PEELED TO COMPENSATE FOR THE HARM YOU CAUSED OUR SPECIAL LITTLE LADIES!”

The Brain Eater trio eagerly nodded after receiving the signal from Caria and drew the black-stained blades fastened to their waists. Delighted beyond delight, they slowly shuffled over to the men paralyzed with fear.

“W-Wait! Vesta sputtered. “We haven’t done anything yet! Let’s strike a deal! I’ll apologize too. If necessary, I’ll even prepare more money and goods than you could ever want. I’ll even withdraw from Dragontan! You can have my stash of Popil Grass as well! I can have lots of flesh prepared for you! So, so, won’t you please put away your weapons?!”

“NU-UH!!!”

The three monsters rejected Vesta’s proposal in overly enthusiastic, loud voices.

“You insulted our precious little ladies. This is an unforgivable crime. Words can be sharper than any blade, and your blades continue to cause our young mistresses grief. This is not proper HUEMAN behavior. YOU CAUSED THE GIRLS TO WEEP AND WAIL!!”

“No, we never wept or wailed,” Caria corrected.

“Yep, no weeping here,” Maria added.

“Then you pardon them?”

“Not in a million years.” Caria also sentenced the foolish men to death most painful with a callous smile. “These men insulted His Majesty. That is the mostest unpardonable crime of all. I, Cary, made a vow to do whatever I mustest to show my gratitude to the King who saved Big Sista and me. And that I would live freely in a way that would make His Majesty and Mother proud.”

Caria spoke of the convictions that shaped her. Of the new person she'd become thanks to Takuto Ira. And of the impulses brought forth by the evil soul that had manifested within her when she joined the forces of evil.

"I, Cary, will never forgive Mynoghra's enemies.

I will never pardon anyone who threatens those I care about.

I will never pardon anyone who hurts Big Sista.

And I will never forgive anyone who insults His Majesty.

His Majesty told me that evil people are free to do anything. They can get away with anything. That's why I give this order to the birdmen with the freedom approved of by my king: you have my permission to have your way with them."

What she said was an extreme case of self-justification. An evil-minded assertion formed by carefully mixing a child's innocence with the vindictiveness of a scorned woman. But there was some level of legitimacy to her convictions, making it hard to dismiss as self-righteousness and insanity gone too far.

"Oh, but you can all rest assured," Caria said as an afterthought. "His Majesty just contacted me. He has seen everything that has transpired here and has given the okay to go wild."

Their time was running out.

Sheer glee burned in the Brain Eaters' eyes when they heard they not only had the king's stamp of approval but also that he was watching over them. Why, they could even declare they would never encounter another skinning this enjoyable and inspiring.

Several of the thugs tried to flee, but they were glued to the spot by a mysterious power that increased the town's public safety.

Vesta had been screaming something or other the whole time, consisting of begging for his life, negotiating, groveling, and surrendering. But none of it got through to Caria.

"All right, hop to it, please," she said dryly.

And so, the curtain rose on an exquisitely fleshy feast.

“IN THAT CASE...!”

“WE WILL PROMPTLY...!”

“SKIN THEM!”

“Go get ’em, boys,” Maria cheered.

“COME AND MAKE US HUEMAN!!!” the Brain Eater trio trilled.



HELL—the room had become hell on earth.

The familiar table, cupboards, and couches were dyed in a gory red, and what used to be Human was splayed here and there as crimson, skinned husks.

“HUEMANS!!!”

“Human!”

The three Brain Eaters wore the still steamy, sweaty flesh of their fresh kills and comfortably chatted amongst themselves like teenagers shopping at a clothing store on their day off. The older twin, Maria, hopped about with glee, causing the puddles of blood at her feet to splash with every hop.

Antelise was staring at them in disbelief when she felt a tap on her shoulder that wrenched a tearful scream from her lips.

“*Eek!*”

“Um, Miss Antelise, I’m really, really sorry about what my subordinates did.”

The girl ruefully bowing her head to Antelise was the one and same younger twin sister she’d joyfully reunited with a few hours earlier that day.

“They went a little *tooooo* far. How do I put it? I also didn’t think the birdmen would take things this far.”

The young girl lowered and raised her head so many times it almost looked like a click beetle jumping. Looking at her reminded Antelise of how she used to bow her head like that to her elders when she made a big mistake, too—going down memory lane was her way of escaping reality.

“So, um, you see...I don’t have the money to pay for cleaning this room, so I

would be *ever* so grateful if you could overlook it this once.” Caria pressed her hands together.

What in the Spirits is she saying? Antelise honestly didn’t understand. *What is this adorable little girl apologizing for in this hellscape?*

The answer came easily.

“I’m so, so sorry for getting this pretty room dirty after you invited us over and all.”

Caria was apologizing for making the room *dirty*.

“And, um, may I impose upon you to...uh...explain things in a more positive light to your higher-ups?” Caria implored her, batting her eyelashes like she was trying to mimic an adult woman’s way of being cute.

“I-I can take care...of that,” Antelise barely squeezed out. And when she did, Caria’s whole face lit up like a sunflower after sunrise.

“Yay! Thank you ever so muchest, Miss Antelise!”

Ahh, she thinks nothing of it.

It suddenly all clicked into place for Antelise.

This was evil in the truest sense.

Taking pleasure in making people suffer? Feeding on despair? Satisfaction at the sight of other’s misery? All of those things depict evil as told in stories, but true evil isn’t so simple.

True evil treads the thin line between good and bad intentions and never doubts it’s wrong. Someone who can kill a person with the same feeling they brush their teeth with in the morning and whisper their affections to someone that very same night as if suddenly adoring the fleeting brilliance of life. Someone who calmly lives out their days harboring the ultimate contradictions within themselves—that is true evil.

What exactly am I looking at? Antelise wondered.

Girls who giggled and smiled.

Girls who happily blushed when Antelise patted them on the head.

Girls whose eyes filled with tears when they tried the foul food Antelise warned them not to touch.

Those girls from the past few days and the girls splattered with blood in front of Antelise looked so remarkably similar, her brain struggled to accept reality and tried desperately to reject what she was seeing.

Ahh, they're one in the same. They embody both sides.

That thought plagued Antelise.

How in the Spirits should I interact with these girls from now on? What's the right answer?

"LADY MARIA!"



As Antelise was absently brooding, sunken down on the cold, hard ground, one of the Brain Eater escorts staring at her started shouting.

“Mayor Antik has had a bout of incontinence! She requires HUEMAN consideration, no?!”

His loud comment finally forced Antelise to notice the warm feeling between her thighs. As an adult woman, this was an embarrassment that would haunt her for the rest of her life. But even that paled in comparison to the bloody scene before her.

“I’m sorry! I’m so, so, so, so SORRY!”

Flustered by her escort’s insensitive remark, Caria resumed bowing and apologizing with a vengeance. Apparently, she also worried about things like that a lot too. Somehow, that fact struck Antelise as oddly funny, making her feel like she needed to say something to calm the girl down before she broke her neck.

“N-No...i-it’s okay. H-Hehe...*hehe*...I guess I can’t get married now, can I?” Antelise bluffed with a dry, cracked laugh.

She felt as if she’d faint if she didn’t laugh at herself. She might lose her mind if she didn’t make light of the situation.

Did she actually manage to laugh? Or was that more like a strangled breath catching in her throat? She didn’t know, but the sheer fact the girls cared about her as a friend was the only thread holding Antelise’s shattering mind together.

“As decent HUEMAN beings, we should also all have a leak so as not to let the beautiful young lady be ashamed!”

“Why, that’s a marvelous idea!”

“Sounds plenty HUEMAN to me!”

“Leaky-leak!” Maria cheered.

Antelise didn’t even have the energy to stop them, but at least she regained enough of her mind to think of what she’d like to say to them.

Meanwhile, she thought she heard something snap beside her. She looked to

see Caria fuming with a terrifying smile. They had awoken a sleeping, raging dragon.

“I’m sorry, Big Sista, can you step aside?”

“...Hm? Okey dokey.”

“All right, I want all the Brain Eaters to line up right there. No, not that way... from front to back. Yes, yes. Now please stay that way,” Caria ordered her escorts with that bone-chilling smile of hers. Once she had finally succeeded in getting them to stand in a straight line in front of her...

“STOP FOOLING AROUND, YOU BIRDBRAINS!”

She charged forward and landed a flying kick on all three Brain Eaters.

“GUUUAAAAGH!!!”

“My Huemans!” Maria cried.

The three horrifying monsters went tumbling backward.

The older sister tended to the monsters with tears in her eyes.

The younger sister resumed bowing her head like a broken doll.

It was almost hilarious...as if Antelise was watching a comedy. It reminded her of the time she saw a clown show in Qualia. It was a stupidly funny performance that invited laughter.

“A-Ahahaha...you guys are silly...”

Except the more their group fooled around, the more the pools of blood splashed, forcing Antelise to face reality and muster what little energy she had to crack a strained smile.



Brain Eater

Medic Unit

Strength: 3 Move: 1

Grants the following buffs to ally Humanoids:

Strength +50%

Resilience +50%

Town and City Public Order +50%



Description

~HUEMANS! HUEMANS! HUEMANS! OH HOW WE LOVE HUEMANS!~

Brain Eaters serve as the primary Medic units for the evil civilization of Mynoghra. Their main ability allows them to heal ally units in the same stacked group every turn. They also have an obsession with Humans, and grant buffs to Humanoid races, including Humans and Demi-humans. However, they are difficult to use correctly and require a special strategy because Mynoghra has no Humanoid races in its roster.

Chapter 9: A Time of Reflection

THE day after the twins had successfully finished their first mission and returned to Mynoghra's Imperial Capital, Takuto found himself kneeling and begging Atou for forgiveness for the first time in a while.

"King Takuto!" she bellowed. "Why did you let those girls go *SOOOO* far?! You were telepathically watching them, right?! You ignored your other work to watch over them, didn't you?! Then you had plenty of opportunities to caution them!!"

Just yesterday, Atou had wondered why the girls had come home wearing Phon'kaven clothing, and it was that very morning that she'd caught the twins trying to wash the blood and gore out of their regular clothes in secret. And it was only now that she'd learned the twins and the Brain Eaters went so wild in the town of Dragontan with Takuto's blessing that it caused the Elf mayor to soil herself from the trauma. The whole sticky ordeal was being quietly mopped under the rug by the authority of the King of Mynoghra.

Just the other day, Atou had turned into an affirm-everything-Takuto-says machine, but this situation transformed her into a nagging machine instead.

"I couldn't do that...I mean..." Takuto started mumbling, "I don't want them to hate me for taking them to task, you know? They're at a sensitive age. I want to give them as much freedom as possible so they can become more independent —"

"What? Are you their father or something?! *Huh?!?*"

It was hopeless. Utterly hopeless. Everyone involved in this incident was hopeless. Atou had hoped Caria was capable of taking the extenuating circumstances into consideration, but the second she hopped on board Takuto's little plan to cover the whole thing up, she became guilty of the same crime.

To make things worse, the King of Ruin was the biggest troublemaker of them

all. He pampered the twins so much, he didn't interfere in their reckless behavior. This was too great a blunder to overlook.

Atou despaired that her hunch about things not going well turned out to be painfully on the mark.

"So, what are you going to do about it?!" she pressed him. "From what I heard, the town mayor had a bout of incontinence after witnessing the Brain Eaters skin a few dozen people alive! If this were a manga or an anime, we would totally be classified as the villains for that! We're on the path of a villain who acts all strong in the first half of a story only to be easily defeated by the main character in the second half after they've powered up from lots and lots and lots of training!!"

"Th-This world isn't a manga or an anime, though—"

"Which makes it even WORSE!" Atou snapped.

It worked out fine because the people they killed were the members of a rebellious organization working against Phon'kaven. Atou had no complaints about getting rid of them. The issue was that they had painted the welcoming mayor's reception room walls red with blood and viscera, resulting in traumatizing the woman.

This whole mission hinged on the condition that the envoy must not behave in a disrespectful manner, per what they'd discussed in the meeting before they sent the girls. The result? Their envoys caused such a big, grievous incident it went above and beyond being disrespectful.

"I guess the Brain Eaters were a bad influence on Caria and Maria..."

"It was those *TWO* who had *HAPPILY* sicced the birdmen on those people!!"

"Our girls strayed from the right path..." Takuto moped, his shoulders slumping.

He was acting like this was the end of the issue, but Atou was still fuming mad. In the end, all the people, including the Brain Eaters, involved in the Dragontan Recon Mission, also known as The Traumatized Mayor incident, received a stern lecture from Atou, and the matter was closed for the time being.



“ALL! RIGHT! THEN! Let’s begin discussing how to handle Dragontan!”

Atou’s loud, angry voice and her hand slamming down on the documents piled up on the table signaled the meeting’s commencement. The usual members had gathered, joined officially by the twins who were steadily becoming more recognized as future leaders within Mynoghra.

“Have some candy.”

“Thank you very muchest, Your Majesty!”

“Yippee!”

Yes, they had joined the meeting...all while being ridiculously spoiled by King Takuto.

“Have any of you reflected on your actions yet?!” Atou promptly smacked them with her complaints, her anger palpable.

“EEP!!!” Takuto and the twins gulped in unison.

The three of them understood they were acting out of line and huddled together in silence, their bodies trembling. The twins were one thing, but even Mynoghra’s King had become a disgrace with the way he was acting.

“L-Lady Atou...you should let them off the hook,” Gia said, a little frightened.

“You really should,” Emle added. “It’s more important to continue the meeting... Not that I don’t completely agree with you.”

“Nay,” Elder Moltar chimed in. “It is not my place to question the King’s judgment, but I still believe we failed to properly educate the twins.”

The Dark Elves rushed to smooth things over in their own way. Even Atou must’ve sensed the awkwardness in the room because she shook her head and tempered the agitation showing on her face.

“*HMPH!* ...Fine, I’ll let it pass. I am willing to admit I lost my temper a *tad* there. Discussing Dragontan comes first.”

Everyone understood how she felt, but they’d already covered the mistakes Takuto and the twins made. Constantly bringing up something that had already

been dealt with would only waste precious time and prevent everyone from moving on. In the end, the most important thing was Mynoghra and the peaceful life Takuto aspired toward. Atou never once forgot that, and so she strove to bring them back on topic.

“All right, Elfuur Sisters, is it safe to assume your investigation’s findings were accurately covered in the report you wrote?” Elder Moltar asked to be sure.

“Yes, Elder. His Majesty looked over it for us already, so it shouldn’t have any mistakes,” Caria said. “You can ask us about anything you don’t understand.”

All the details of the things the twin sisters saw and heard in the town of Dragontan had been written down and turned in as a report. Everyone had already read their report, and the primary purpose of this meeting was to decide on their next policies based on that information.

“*Hrm,*” Elder Moltar hummed contemplatively. “The town seems to be in a state of disrepair on a people level. I must say that while our attention was mostly drawn to the twins’ radical conduct, we can’t necessarily blame them given the state of things.”

“You have a point there,” Emle agreed. “Considering the situation in Dragontan, some sort of chaos was bound to ensue sooner or later.”

“Sounds likely.” Gia nodded along.

They were evaluating the situation in Dragontan as they looked over the documents in front of them. By staying in the town themselves, they could see the whole picture that had been limited by their long-distance scouting. This also showed them the town in question was in more dire straits than they’d imagined.

“The townspeople are considerably on edge and scared for their lives, so I believe if things go well, some might even want to immigrate to our great empire,” Emle suggested.

“That reminds me, we were able to learn some of our Dark Elf clansmen reside in that country. This is most fortuitous news!” Elder Moltar exclaimed. “If you leave the task to me, I guarantee I will get them all to join our empire instead!”

Elder Moltar made promises there was no guarantee he could keep, and Gia and Emle were enthusiastic about the idea. Their desire to reunite with their clansmen made perfect sense, but things must be handled in order.

“You’re putting the cart before the horse,” Atou said, reining in the Dark Elves before they completely derailed the meeting. “I won’t deny that it is great news, though. It’s also wonderful to know of somewhere we might be able to obtain immigrants from.”

“Between the Dark Elves located in Phon’kaven’s capital and anyone who wants to immigrate from Dragontan, we might actually have a population boom.”

“You’re right, King Takuto,” Atou said. “We were able to establish a connection with Mayor Antik, so I believe future negotiations with Dragontan should proceed smoothly from here on.”

The Dark Elves looked delighted to have Takuto agree with their assessment. His comment was essentially the same as him saying he’d welcome their estranged clansmen with open arms. All they had to do was get rid of the problem at hand. Unfortunately, the problem in question was still a complicated one for the Dark Elves to solve even after getting a motivation boost.

“What about the Barbarians?” Takuto asked.

Indeed, the biggest problem facing them right now was the sudden and random appearance of Barbarians attacking Phon’kaven and the potential threat they might eventually pose to Mynoghra.

“The Brain Eaters reported on them. At a glance, they aren’t much different from the Barbarians we know of. Goblins, Orcs, and sometimes even Hill Giants appear to attack.”

“I know how to handle Goblins and Orcs, but Hill Giants are a whole other kinda beast,” Gia groaned unexpectedly.

The Hill Giant, with its huge body and superhuman strength, was considered a big threat in this world. It was common practice to avoid battle with them to prevent massive losses to an army. But conflict couldn’t be avoided when they

were coming to wreak havoc on towns and cities. Relatively weak Barbarians, such as Goblins and Orcs, could be easily dealt with by the Dragontan Town Defense Force, but losses were inevitable when they were up against Hill Giants.

“A few to a few dozen seem to attack every day,” Elder Moltar said, looking over the Brain Eaters’ report. “There are some days without an attack, but looking at the overall trend toward increasing numbers, I believe it’s dangerous for us to idly sit by and do nothing.”

The standard strategy would be to wait for the town and its defense force to recover and then pour resources into production to further strengthen its defense capabilities, but that wouldn’t work in Dragontan while under daily raids. It was clear as day what would happen to the town if they continued not to get supplies and reinforcements from Phon’kaven, and it was practically a miracle that they’d run into Mynoghra and were able to receive aid at such a critical time.

“With all of these factors in mind, does anyone have anything to say about how we should proceed with defending Dragontan?” Atou asked, looking around the table.

Silence reigned until Gia eventually spoke up.

“One thing’s for sure: the twins and the Medics won’t be participating.”

“Aw...”

“Too bad...”

“Shhh!”

The girls adorably protested against Gia’s assessment. But since Takuto fully understood the precarious position he and the girls were in, he hurriedly held his index finger in front of his lips and shushed them. Takuto wanted to avoid poking that sleeping tiger all over again.

“Warrior Captain Gia is right. I’m against splitting up our forces, but we’ll run into a different set of problems if we send the wrong people...” Emle groaned. “It’s hard to find the right balance.”

“Oh yeah, I’m participating, no questions asked, so plan with that in mind,” Atou said casually.

As Emle was stunned into silence, Elder Moltar began to rub his beard, instantly understanding why she would participate.

“You want to make use of your special ability, no?”

“Yes, my ability to steal my opponent’s skills. Even weaklings like Barbarians have some useful skills worth snatching. Now’s as good a time as ever to obtain them. Isn’t that right, King Takuto?”

“Yep. You can count on some great enhancements from it.”

Atou’s unique Hero ability allowed her to steal the skills of her defeated enemies. Because she has this ability, she can eventually reign as the strongest Hero. Put another way, she wasn’t living up to her potential if she didn’t snatch skills. She was only living up to the name Sludge Atou by seizing others’ skills.

Neither Takuto nor Atou had any intentions of missing out on this wonderful opportunity.

“Then we just need to pick out your retinue then,” Elder Moltar said. “*Hrm...* we want to refrain from overwhelming Dragontan’s townspeople, so the Long-legged Bugs are out.”

“If we count them out, that only leaves Captain Gia’s Warriors as a proper escort...” Emle pointed out.

“Nay, they are to remain and guard Mynoghra. I plan to take these old bones out into the action.”

“Oh?”

Everyone looked at Elder Moltar. They were all surprised by his unexpected proposal.

“I’d certainly be happy to leave all the annoying negotiating and boring talking to you, but...don’t we need a few more people for this?” Atou asked.

It was a great idea for Elder Moltar to go on this mission. They were going to Dragontan to offer military aid, so there was no need to worry about the political repercussions of sending their most influential people. But, as Atou

said, two people couldn't protect an entire town on their own.

"I'm thinking about bringing my apprentices along," Elder Moltar said. "I was training them to run the Magic Research Institute once it's finished being built, but they are as capable of fighting Goblins as they are pushing papers. If their numbers aren't satisfactory, we could borrow a few of the Warriors too."

"Well, I'll basically be handling all the enemies myself, so I don't mind a little company," Atou said with a shrug.

"Combined military operations between allied nations are likely to be fraught with complications. Please use my apprentices for all the tedious miscellaneous matters, my lady."

In other words, they were trying to make it look like they had the numbers to match the devastation Atou could inflict on her own. Takuto and Atou held firmly to the policy that they wanted to avoid casualties at all costs, especially while they had a limited population.

Atou felt there was no problem if they were just coming along to handle the tedious things, so she glanced at Takuto to see how he felt. Judging by his satisfied expression, she determined her king was of the same mind as her.

"Very well. I'm counting on you to make things easier for me."

"Then please leave Mynoghra's defense to our Warriors!"

"But I have concerns about our defenses..."

They had finished selecting who they'd dispatch to Dragontan, but Emle felt the need to voice her concerns about their defenses. Atou eagerly nodded as if she were waiting for someone to bring that up and flashed a confident smile that seemed to say "All eyes on me!"

"We have naturally already thought that through. We will make the Hero Isla the cornerstone of our defense."

"Oooooohhhh!!!"

The room was filled with oohs and aahs.

Isla, Queen of Bugs was the name of one of Mynoghra's Heroes who stood alongside Sludge Atou, and now it was finally time to bring her into the

conversation.

“Isla’s production is nearly finished at the perfect time,” Atou continued. “It’s almost as if everything lined up perfectly for us! You were right to speed up her production, King Takuto! That’s our genius king for you!”

“A new Hero, eh? We can rest easy with her around! His Majesty’s discernment has paid off once again!”

“His Majesty is amazing!” Caria cheered.

“Hip hip hooray!” Maria clapped her hands.

While it was a complete coincidence, Isla’s production was finishing at the absolute best possible time. Atou could leave Mynoghra to hunt Barbarians exactly because they had sped up Isla’s production. Of course, it was Takuto who’d made that call, and he was who they praised for it. He felt kind of shy being so grandly praised for something he hadn’t actually put much thought into, but he still made a big show of it by confidently nodding along.

Takuto had recently learned that role-playing as the Absolute was necessary sometimes. He risked getting found out later, but he lived by the rule not to worry about future problems—also called postponing a problem until it hits you in the face.

“We will enhance our forces by pairing Isla, who strengthens any insects, with the Long-legged Bugs. We will also have the Warriors stationed here, so I think that should be a strong enough defense.”

Mynoghra’s military might would increase tenfold with the addition of Isla. In addition to her physical prowess as a Hero unit, all Bug units would gain buffs to their Strength with her present. Naturally, the several Long-legged Bugs they already had would also benefit from these buffs, transforming them from weak scouting units to powerful, speedy units with high mobility.

They also had the upper hand with their city being built upon Cursed Terrain that gave massive bonuses to evil-aligned units. Dark Elves gained bonuses in Forest Terrain too. With all these factors put together, any half-baked attempts at an attack would end in failure before their various defenses.

After that, they discussed a few more things in detail, but their overall policy

didn't change.

"What do you think, King Takuto?" Atou asked him. "Please let us know if you have any suggestions or pointers."

Takuto's approval was needed to finalize anything, but he had no complaints about the decision they'd come to. He was especially glad that Elder Moltar suggested his apprentices join Atou. Now he could redirect some of the Warriors he'd planned to send with her toward defending Mynoghra. Takuto was further convinced of the value the Dark Elves provided by participating in these meetings because of the different ideas that came out of it, like this one.

"Hmm, sounds perfect to me. It's a good strategy."

With his approval, everyone bowed and immediately moved to make their plans a reality.

"In that case, I will sortie the moment Hero Isla is complete," Atou said.

And so, they had decided which troops to dispatch to Dragontan.

"I'm looking forward to how many skills I'll be able to plunder."

Atou becoming stronger would make Mynoghra stronger, which in turn would help them achieve Takuto's aspirations.

Atou giggled with glee, for she couldn't hide her excitement at the potential powers the Barbarians might net her.

Chapter 10: Queen of Bugs

THE day after they'd decided on the Dragontan Dispatch Team, Takuto was brimming with visible excitement for the first time in a while. Atou became even more excited seeing her king's enthusiasm and the Dark Elves grew nervous watching their leaders act out of character.

"At long, long last! We will see the birth of a new Hero!" Atou trumpeted. "How long we have waited for this day! And oh how many Resources we have squirreled away for it!"

"Honestly, it was a painful amount of Resources we had to set aside, but we'll finally get to see the payoff!" Takuto exclaimed.

Resources—consisting of Food collected from the Flesh Trees and Lumber harvested from the nearby forest—were piled sky-high in the center of the Ceremonial Grounds. Stones found from digging up the ground were also stacked in piles.

With help from Atou and the Long-legged Bugs, they'd finally managed to collect enough to spawn a Hero. A lot of effort went into getting this far. The twin girls toddled over to the King wreathed in shadows as they recalled how their clansmen willingly participated in the Resource collection day and night to show their gratitude to him.

"She's gonna have a full belly," Maria said, her sleepy eyes widening with surprise.

"Your Majesty? What kind of person is this Hero you're about to call over?" Caria asked, observing the grounds with more curiosity than usual.

"You'll see," Takuto said with a wink.

"Spawning time is the most exciting time! I can't wait!" Atou exclaimed.

The girls' faces lit up with anticipation.

“...Atou, what do you think will happen with Isla?” Takuto telepathically asked Atou, whose eyes were sparkling with the same innocent enthusiasm as the twins’.

“It’s a question of whether she will be on our side or not, right?”

They had one critical matter to discuss: how would Isla view Takuto Ira?

Takuto, a former human from Japan, was living a new life in this world as the game settings defined him—that is, as the King of Ruin Takuto Ira.

Atou remembered interacting with Takuto as a game player from another world, but there was no guarantee Isla would be the same. And if she was, that presented its own set of concerning problems.

If every Hero unit from the game had a will of their own, there was a chance some might refuse to recognize Takuto Ira as King and rise up against him.

In *Eternal Nations*, every civilization is led by a Commander who is essentially the player’s alter ego. The player can choose from several Commanders, with some Heroes doubling as Commanders or some Commanders becoming playable units on the map.

Isla serves as both a selectable Commander and a unit in the game.

Choosing her as Mynoghra’s Commander opened up the Bug Rush strategy, where the player forgoes research to focus on production and unit creation, allowing them to overrun many of the enemy empires during early-game. She was popular with a subset of players for her unique skillset that opened up an entirely new playstyle for gamers.

In other words, Isla could overthrow Takuto as Mynoghra’s Commander. In fact, *Eternal Nations* even introduced a system allowing Commanders to be changed or to overthrow each other.

Takuto and Atou were rightfully concerned Isla might refuse to accept Takuto as King and turn on him.

“In the unlikely event things go south, I’ll put her in her place myself. Isla starts with 10 Strength. That puts her on par with where I’m at now, but I have the upper hand with the Holy Sword Artes.”

“I think it’ll turn out fine, but if it doesn’t, I’m counting on you.”

This could be a turning point for them.

The fact they’d been brought to this world was a strange phenomenon in and of itself. They couldn’t be overly optimistic, no matter how much of the game system they knew had been applied to their surroundings.

Or rather, it was precisely because game logic had been applied to their world that they needed to tread extra cautiously.

Takuto was both cautious in considering every strategy and sometimes daring in choosing a risky move. Of course, all of this was only possible because of Atou, who he trusted fully.

“I will protect you until my dying breath.”

“Please don’t. I can’t resummon you.”

And so the ritual began.

All of Mynoghra’s key figures were present.

Takuto did consider holding the summoning in secret in case Isla rebelled, but he decided it’d be more effective to have the Dark Elves there to help suppress her if they had to. He understood how loyal and competent the Dark Elves were.

He didn’t tell them about Isla potentially revolting because he didn’t want to unnecessarily worry them or have them warn him against it, but he was fairly positive they would follow his orders without hesitation if the worst-case scenario happened. The group here had already witnessed the summoning ritual every time he summoned a new Long-legged Bug, so they possessed a basic understanding of the challenges involved, but not the difference in scale when summoning a Hero.

“The ritual has begun. Don’t move from that spot until you are ordered to do so...”

The Dark Elves silently nodded and swallowed hard at Atou’s instructions. They knew from their talks beforehand that they weren’t supposed to move.

The sky had turned a mutinous shade of gray, and the giant, swirling clouds

brought about an unusual darkness. A mysterious power surged forth from the ground and swept over the surrounding area.

Something like a crack, not unlike a spider web forming in a pane of glass, twisted into existence in the center of the Materials, and it rapidly sucked everything in. At the same time, an egg-like object with a reddish-brown fleshy texture formed and increased in size as the Materials were absorbed into the rift.

“Wh-Why, this is...”

Elder Moltar quickly clamped his mouth shut, feeling guilty for uttering anything that might distract the King during an all-important ritual. The sight was just so great the words left him before he could stop himself. He wasn’t alone in this, as Gia, the twins, Emle, and the others let out utterances despite trying their hardest to remain silent.

It was not fear that caused their lips to part—they were simply awestruck.

What a marvelous sight!

What a grand phenomenon!

The magnificence of the miracles worked by their king, the might of the Hero about to be born, and above all, the infinite power that the King exercised—witnessing these things increased the awe and respect they held for the being known as Takuto Ira.

Atou was also impressed by what she saw.

She had worked out a plan of action with Takuto in case Isla went rogue, but in her honest estimation, she thought the chances of that were exceedingly low. Her fanatical devotion to her king and her adoration for Takuto as an individual led her to believe the other Heroes would naturally feel the same about him. Not only that, but she had this odd instinct deep within her that insisted everything was going to work out just fine.

GI-CHI, GI-CHI, GI-CHI!

A strange sound reverberated within the grotesque flesh-egg. It was the bizarre heartbeat of an even more bizarre life form.

After a while, the flesh sack grew so large it reached its limits and cracked. The sticky insides poured out, and a huge mass appeared together with the viscous liquid. Looking much like a moth breaking free of its cocoon, it spread its insect wings and let out a monstrous cry as if to express the joy it felt with its entire body.



At first glance, it looked like an ant, but it had sharp mandibles and horns capable of crushing everything in sight. The torso was definitely that of an insect, but its bulky build seemed to take after humans, eliminating the more delicate features of an arthropod. Something like human breasts protruded from its chest, increasing the discomfort its strangeness gave all who looked upon it.

Its various spiny limbs were also too thick to be built for speed, and the two spiked, grasping forelegs were clearly meant to hold and tear its prey to shreds. The very thin, shiny film making up its two sets of wings glistened with a rainbow of colors as they flapped in tandem, providing a whimsical sight when paired with the muddy green of its exoskeleton.

This insect, possessing a body as big as a house, glanced around the area confused. Then it almost humorously tilted its head like an innocent child unsure of what was going on until its gaze shifted to Takuto, and it promptly lowered its large head in a respectful bow.

“Aah, *aaaahhh*. My great and mighty king.” A bewitching, youthful woman’s voice spilled from the insect’s mouth. “It’s an honor to meet you in a place like this. This Isla, who rules over all bugs, is most joyful and deeply moved to be able to serve you once again, my master.”

The Dark Elves were unnerved by the awfully Humanoid voice coming from the outlandish creature. Isla perked up at their dismay but seemed to have no interest in doing anything other than keeping her head bowed until Takuto spoke.

Takuto watched and observed her for a short moment before nodding with satisfaction and taking one step forward. Atou hurried to stop her king from doing anything reckless, but he didn’t heed her. He eventually arrived before Isla and looked up at her towering body.

“Long time no see. Do you remember me?” he asked.

“...*Hm?* Oh, oh, I see, I see! I get it! Yes, yes, I most certainly know you, King Takuto Ira. You are the great King of Ruin who knows all. You are also *Eternal Nations’* top player. Did I get that right?”

“Yep!”

“I’m a little confused by this situation, but I’m honored you created me again, my master. Please use my power to your heart’s content.”

Isla nodded and let out a joyful roar. It was impossible to see any kind of expression on her buggy visage, but, for some reason, Takuto was able to see the indescribable mirth deep within her compound eyes.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

Hero <<Isla, Queen of Bugs>> has entered the world.

The Strength of all Bug units throughout the world has increased by +2.

~Assemble before the awakening of **Mother Isla**!

~Sing with joy for the awakening of **Mother Isla**!

All bugs bow before Queen **Mother Isla** and become the cornerstone of a new era!

OK

Isla, Queen of Bugs

Combat Unit

Strength: 10

Move: 1

<<Evil>>

<<Hero>>

<<Larva Breeder>>

※ This unit increases the Strength of all Bug units in the world by +2.

※ All Bug units that encounter this unit are immediately placed under the control of the empire Isla belongs to.



Description

~Every bug was birthed by her and filled this world. All the little children are still quietly waiting for Mother Isla's command.~

Isla is one of Mynoghra's Hero units. This unit's Distinct Traits include strengthening all Bug units and the production of units called Larva. Larva are characterized by their weak Strength and inability to level up, but this is balanced with their unique ability to carry out activities requiring heavy manual labor, such as clearing land. They can also work on farms and in mines to harvest Materials and Resources. It is possible to use large numbers of Larva to overrun or disrupt enemy territory, but they also prove helpful in enhancing an empire's productivity.

AFTER successfully summoning the powerful new Hero unit, Takuto, Atou, and Isla decided to talk alone in the Palace now that the dust had settled.

“It’s good to see you again, Isla. Or should I greet you like it’s the first time? I didn’t have the chance to speak with you much earlier, so allow me to get straight to the point. Are we right to believe you remember playing *Eternal Nations* with Takuto?” Atou asked, probing Isla with her unrelenting gaze.

Although Atou wasn’t in a fighting stance, she was the picture of a loyal retainer as she stood ready to take action at a second’s notice. Isla couldn’t help but see her like a loyal guard dog barking loudly at its master’s side, and her entirely inhuman facial muscles moved in a buggy smile.

“Oh my, look at you little Atou, all puffed up like an angry cat. I can see your desperate eagerness to protect King Takuto. How cute. I want to pet you.”

Amused, Isla let out a high-pitched chirp and skillfully used her foreleg to ruffle Atou’s hair. Atou swatted at the spiny foreleg to protect her hair before it could turn into a bug’s nest. She puffed out her cheeks in a sulky pout, all the fight going out of her.

“Hey! Stop that! And answer my question already!” she huffed.

“*Boo!* Someone’s as stubborn as a bedbug! But maybe that’s what makes you so cute? Anyway, my answer is YES. Every millisecond of the time I played with King Takuto is ingrained in my heart. Could it be any other way?”

Isla’s eyes turned toward Takuto as she rubbed his head, her gaze insisting she was his faithful subordinate through and through. It was almost as if she were saying the time they had spent in that fictional world had built immutable, steely loyalty between them...

Takuto was wonderstruck by her attitude. He’d initially thought that only Atou, who’d appeared with him in this world, would remember who he used to be. However, judging by what Isla said, the other Heroes remembered him as well. Not only that, but they also treasured the time they’d spent together and still adored him as their king even outside of the game world.

Something about that tickled him pink. He experienced the sentimental feelings one might when reminiscing with an old friend of many years. Then

again, since all Mynoghra's Hero units had idiosyncratic personalities, it was more like being reunited with a close buddy who was more of a bad influence than anything...

Takuto stopped himself from thinking about the other Heroes with troublesome backstories and crazy personalities and redirected his attention toward Isla, who'd answered his call.

"I didn't have many opportunities to summon Isla during the game, but I'm still super fond of her. Actually, I'm fond of all the Heroes," Takuto said.

"You basically called on me whenever your strategy using little Atou fell apart."

"Yep, that's right! I always had to rethink my strategy whenever a Hero who could suppress Atou's skills or had higher Strength appeared! That's when I'd implement a strategy using Isla's Bug Rush to wear down my opponent's empire...!"

Takuto always became talkative when it came to his favorite game. Drawing on the memories of those happy days, he brought up all their nostalgic experiences together. After furiously fixing her messed up hair, Atou joined them in reminiscing about *Eternal Nations* for a while, too.

But while it was fine and dandy to reminisce about the past, Isla firmly remembered there were more important matters to tend to first. She waited until there was a pause in their passionate discussion to suggest they get back on topic.

"By the way, isn't it about time you tell this servant of yours about what's going on, Your Majesty? I'm lonely being the odd woman out."

"Oh, yeah! I forgot!" Takuto said. "Sorry about that. Let me fill you in right now."

It was impossible to tell what emotion was reflected in those compound eyes of hers, but she was clearly perplexed. That was likely why she'd restlessly scanned their surroundings the entire time they were happily talking the hours away.

Their current Palace was strongly influenced by Dark Elf architecture and

design, starkly contrasting Mynoghra's Palace in-game. The unfamiliar scenery was likely making the Queen of Bugs uncomfortable.

We need her to get used to things fast, Takuto thought. He decided to devote as much time as he could to getting Isla accustomed to this empire as soon as possible.

"Please wait, King Takuto!" Atou cried. "We shouldn't explain the situation until we know for sure that Isla will faithfully serve you... It's my opinion that we observe her a little longer!"

"Don't you worry your little tentacles, dearie. I won't go taking your Takuto. I'm an all-knowing queen, after all."

"PEST!" Atou hissed.

I hope she adapts to this world quickly...

As a general rule, Heroes are selfish and willful. Their backstories portray them as such, and many of the short skits in-game are all about the quarrels they get into with each other. Something immediately set Atou off and had her snapping at Isla. Fortunately, Queen Isla had the dignity not to respond in kind.

Unfortunately, that only caused Atou to explode with anger...

Takuto sighed at the difficult prospect of trying to rein these problematic Heroes in before cheerfully clapping his hands to stop their quarreling.



"I see. So that's what's going on..."

Isla let out a chirp of surprise that sounded like "Gichichi" after hearing all the details from Takuto. Even the Queen of Bugs experienced confusion and astonishment. Truthfully, she hadn't the faintest idea what was going on, but she forced herself to accept the situation by thinking there must be some meaning to her presence here.

"Yeah. To be honest, there's a lot of stuff I don't get, but I've made it this far thanks to Atou."

"Nonsense. I've only been able to work this hard because you were here with me, King Takuto. I surely would have taken my own life, for the despair

would've been too much for me alone.”

“Atou...”

“King Takuto...”

“I feel like the third wheel...”

Takuto and Atou entered their own little world.

While her memories of *Eternal Nations* were vague, Isla remembered that Hero Atou was Takuto's favorite. She thought it was wonderful that they got along well, but she had a terrible feeling she was in for an uncomfortable time if they always acted like a mating pair. However, she decided to save those concerns for a later time. She had her own tasks to attend to.

Isla had no objections to becoming his subordinate. The unit known as Isla, Queen of Bugs existed solely to fulfill her purpose. Her powers existed for Mynoghra and Mynoghra's excellent Commander, Takuto Ira.

“In any case, I understand your strategy. Although I am but a small insect, it would be my honor to help His Majesty accomplish his ambition to create a peaceful empire in this mysterious land.”

Isla showed her loyalty by bending down her upper half. Viewing this as satisfactory behavior, Takuto decided to appoint her to her pivotal role in his strategy.

“I leave Mynoghra's defense to you, Isla.”

“Oh? Is that all right with you, my master?” Isla asked, tilting her head curiously at his orders.

She was still a newcomer and the first Hero unit to be summoned to this world, since Atou appeared under different circumstances. Her query came with the implied meaning of: “Are you sure it's all right for a Hero with lots of unknowns to be in a position as important as national defense?”

Of course, Isla had no intention of doing something so foolish as rebelling, but it seemed a bit hasty for Takuto to assign her to such an important role at this stage.

“I trust you.”

His expression was unreadable. Even Isla didn't understand what Takuto Ira was thinking. Like Atou, she was cognizant of Takuto in his sickbed from within the game. Hence, she comprehended his personality and tastes to some extent and believed she had a general understanding of his philosophies and guiding principles, but...she couldn't claim to possibly know everything about him.

To Isla's eyes, Takuto Ira looked like the drawing of a human figure painted over in black.

Not that it mattered to her—her thoughts immediately switched over to the orders she was given. The reason why Isla was tasked with defending Mynoghra was simple. She wasn't a Hero designed for combat. Naturally, she could hold her own in a fight if she leveled up and gained various skills to make her more formidable. However, her true value was in the skill "Breeder" that could secure infinite combat units and labor units and the Distinct Trait that increased the Strength of all Bug units by +2.

Since her skill range included the entire world, Bug units outside of Mynoghra would be strengthened too, but Bug units rarely belonged to other empires, so there were virtually no downsides. Thus, the basic strategy using Isla involved boosting national power with Bug labor units and boosting military power by producing endless, squishy Bug combat units while remaining within your own territory.

Isla was a Hero whose true value manifested in defense-centered mass-spawning-based strategies. And Mynoghra also possessed a Hero whose true value manifested in offense-based strategies.

"I'm trembling with awe before the trust Your Majesty places in me," Isla said. "I take it that means the one heading to Phon'kaven to repel the Barbarians is —"

"Uwaaah, I'm going to be so lonely!" a depressed girl whined.

If Isla, Queen of Bugs is Mynoghra's defense Hero, then Sludge Atou is the offense Hero. Although she starts off with the weakest abilities, her unique ability to steal her opponent's skills is just pure evil. She was in an especially sweet position to unilaterally deprive the comparatively weak Barbarians of their skills with little risk to herself.

Barbarians have various useful skills such as Enhanced Strength, Regeneration, and Outdoor Survival that could drastically enhance Atou if she obtained them.

Even in the off-chance that Phon'kaven betrayed them, Atou could easily retreat to the Accursed Lands. Since she was telepathically linked with Takuto, they could converse at all times, allowing her to constantly update and consult him at a second's notice.

Dispatching Atou was an obvious choice in this situation and something that she and Takuto had planned on before they met with the Dark Elves. Of course, how they each felt about it was an entirely different story.

Even if they could communicate telepathically, they'd still be temporarily apart from each other. Takuto relied on Atou for many aspects of national management because he still struggled with speaking to others. Without her around, he'd be thrust into the huge challenge of instructing various people by himself. Meanwhile, Atou was also required to carry out their strategy in a highly stressful environment away from her beloved Takuto.

They both felt very much like they were baby birds being forced from the nest by their parents so that they may either learn to fly or perish on the rocks below. However, trials can't be avoided. They needed to harden their hearts and move forward. Takuto made this decision for Atou's sake and his own.

"I'll be lonely too, Atou. But you're the only one I can count on for this."

They exchanged passionate, heartfelt gazes. Even without telepathy, they could understand each other's feelings. In the heat of the moment, they ran toward each other, arms wide.

"KING TAKUTOOOOOO!"

"ATOUUUU!"

They shared a passionate embrace.

Their exchange might be viewed as one typically reserved for an eternal farewell, but even a temporary separation was that serious to them. Something foreboding niggled at them both. They embraced to silence the echoes of their weak hearts that whispered "What if something bad happens while we're

apart?”

Much of their concern revolved around issues that might arise on a communication front, however...

“I really am the third wheel...”

As Isla watched the stupid couple, she worried if things were going to be all right with them in charge, but her mission took precedence over those thoughts.

“Ohoho. I’m itching to put my skills to use.”

Isla let out a beguiling laugh with a “Gichichi” as she felt gratitude toward the miracle of being granted life in this form when all she’d ever been was game data.

Like Atou, Isla didn’t know what had happened to her. But she did know exactly what she was supposed to do: fulfill the great Takuto Ira’s will and make sure he thoroughly enjoyed his new game. She intended to use every fiber of her being to fulfill her *raison d’etre*.

“Leave the details of our defense to me,” Isla declared. “I shall gather all the bugs throughout the world to meet our master’s demands.”

Now then, how will this game turn out?

Isla had no idea how long this game session would last with her master, but she decided to watch over Takuto with the loving affection of a mother.

Interlude: The Staff Holders' Decision

TONUKAPOLI, who'd returned to Phon'kaven's capital city of Crescent Moon, let out a long-suffering moan as she read the petition written on parchment paper.

"Sounds like things have taken a crazy turn."

The sender was Dragontan's Mayor Antelise Antik. Her petition started with a report about her amicable interaction with the visitors from Mynoghra, followed by a summary of the horrific events that came next. Then came her request for an increased budget to clean up town hall, a myriad of complaints about her work, idle gossip about the King of Ruin's fetishes, and a strongly worded appeal urging they let her retire early. Given how chaotic the whole letter sounded, she was clearly distraught.

Sympathizing with the problems Dragontan had and the immense pressure placed on its mayor, Tonukapoli honed in on only the essential points contained within Antelise's frantic letter. Even if her request to retire was legitimate, Phon'kaven was in no position to consider it, much less permit it. Tonukapoli made a note to send her words of encouragement and consolation, along with a large jug of ale. Then she shifted her energy to worrying about Mynoghra's delegation.

"Those twin girls did that...eh? They say you can't judge a book by its cover, but it's still sad to be misled."

Ever since she'd chatted with the girls during their meeting and the feast that had followed, Tonukapoli thought her life would be all the better if she had granddaughters like them. But peel the layers back, and what she got was something rotten to the core.

She had always believed all that stuff about being in for a great deal of hurt if you fall for evil's beautiful disguises was just a device used in shallow fairytale storytelling. But falling for it in real life posed a serious threat that didn't end in

a harmless lesson for children. Tonukapoli was reminded of how glad she was to have formed friendly relations with Mynoghra when they did.

Sighing again, the cow-headed elder looked up from the parchment in her hand.

“All righty, ladies and gentlebeasts. Yet ANOTHER urgent letter has arrived by post-horse from Dragontan. This time discussing our all too exciting diplomatic project with the King of Ruin.”

Inside the thatched building in the center of the city, where candles mixed with a special herbal solution illuminated the area in a pallid light, the elderly Staff Holders pierced Tonukapoli with their unrelenting gazes.

“The King of Ruin...ehhhh? Truly frightening if it’s indeed trueeee.”

All the Staff Holders were elderly and each had different beast characteristics. One of them—the deer-headed Staff Holder entrusted with mediating their gatherings—groaned as they looked at the parchment Tonukapoli handed over.

Various paranormal entities permeated this world. They rarely appeared within range of mortals, but they occasionally showed themselves to wreak havoc on the world. Therefore, the Staff Holders didn’t for one minute doubt the existence of such a being, although everyone aside from Tonukapoli knew nothing about the King of Ruin.

“Your lower backs would go out if you saw it with your own eyes. You old farts might just die on the spot!” Tonukapoli teased.

“I’d rather not go out that wayyyy.”

“But what to do about this new problem? Things got outta hand thanks to a certain reckless little Staff Holder, but can we really let it continue like this?”

Despite concerns about what had happened in Dragontan, no one here held Tonukapoli responsible for it. It’d be a lie to say they didn’t each have their own opinions on the matter, but they sympathized with her because nobody knew what they would’ve done in her position. More than anything else, they just didn’t have the time to spare whining about what had already transpired.

They had reached a ripe old age as leaders—they knew a thing or two about

how to push aside unnecessary, personal feelings. But even these experienced leaders struggled to come up with something constructive to say after the parchment finished making its way around the room. Mynoghra was so outlandish and out of the ordinary as an empire that it was incredibly difficult to decide how to deal with them.

After a period of contemplation, each elder began to voice their uncertain opinions. And so commenced one of the longest meetings in Staff Holder history.



“TIME to finalize our decisionnnnn.”

The deer-headed Staff Hold clapped their hands.

In the end, the meeting went for days until they finally decided to forgive Mynoghra’s delegation for the problems they’d caused and continue the friendly relations between their two nations.

No one was all too happy with them jumping the gun, but Pepe and Tonukapoli had already established an alliance with Mynoghra in Phon’kaven’s name. This alliance was later sanctioned by the consensus of the Staff Holders, making it formal within Phon’kaven.

Reversing that decision would call their trustworthiness into question and ruin their nation’s reputation. Furthermore, while they had various concerns, they saw the value of accepting Mynoghra’s assistance when they were being logical about it. Setting aside their gut reactions, being allied with Mynoghra was the lifeline Phon’kaven needed right now.

Problems of this magnitude could be easily brushed under the rug and forgiven.

The Staff Holders possessed the wisdom to suppress their emotions to rationally pursue what was in the best interest of their empire.

“Still, never did I think the day would come when we’d join hands with evil incarnate... How should we apologize to the Ancestral Spirits when our time has

come...?”

“Just blame it on Pepe! It was his decision, so you’d better accept it!”

“He truly did the unthinkable despite you being there with him, Tonukapoliiii.”

“If only Pepe was a little more prudent, we’d feel more comfortable with thissss.”

“Keep your chin up... That said, you can’t call back your die after you’ve cast ‘em.”

The Staff Holders naturally began bashing Pepe. Before they knew it, everyone had accepted working with Mynoghra. It wouldn’t have been strange for there to be more discord given their nation’s growing stressful situation and the shocking details contained within the reports they’d been getting from Dragontan.

But for some reason, there was this mysterious conviction among them, like a strong, unshakeable notion that friendship with Mynoghra was sealed in stone and inevitable. This feeling grew even stronger when the topic shifted to the boy they had nominated as their successor.

Not a single soul noticed the mysterious power influencing them.

Chapter 11: Queen Mother

A few days had passed since Atou left for Dragontan with Elder Moltar and some of his support staff and soldiers. Takuto was immediately overwhelmed by despair after losing the partner he cherished most in this world.

“You *reeeaaally* can’t do anything on your own, can you, King Takuto...?”

“Uggggggggggggggghhhh...”

In Mynoghra’s Throne Room, Isla, Queen of Bugs gave her king an exasperated look as he sat perfectly atop the throne like a figurine. For some reason, the great and mighty King of Ruin found himself being lectured by the Hero he’d summoned.

“I cannot believe you are incapable of waking up on your own at this late hour. How in the dark realm did anything ever get done? Hmm?” Isla sighed with a *gichichi*, her forearms folded at her chest.

Takuto’s life had taken a 180-degree turn since Isla took up the mantle of supporting him in Atou’s place. Unlike Atou, who was a lot like Takuto when it came to their self-indulgent and carefree ways, Isla was conscientious and fastidious. Up until now, Takuto had lived relatively freely under his authority as King, but Isla wouldn’t stand for that, unlike Atou, who devoted herself to spoiling their king.

“His Majesty always sleeps until noon.”

“And if he still doesn’t wake up, Cary, Big Sista, and Lady Atou go get him!”

Maria and Caria poked their heads around the throne to answer Isla. They were guilty of treason, betraying their king like that, but no one here was willing to take Takuto’s side. So he did what he had to and beckoned the girls to sit on both sides of him, using them as adorable shields from Isla’s wrath.

Takuto had dropped to a new low without Atou.

“You are one big child...a *manchild*...”

“Ugh. But—”

“No ifs or buts about it, young man! You are the Commander of our mighty Mynoghra and the King of Ruin who will bring about the apocalypse! How could such an imposing figure sleep past noon and require young girls to rouse him? It’s just wrong on all accounts. You will be waking up at a decent hour from now on,” Isla instructed in a motherly way that didn’t leave room for him to refuse.

If Atou was the type to show her undying loyalty by spoiling him on all fronts, Isla was the type to strictly advise him against his personal desires in order to bring out his true potential as a king. It goes without saying which one was correct.

Still, Takuto lacked the courage to talk back to her, and he knew he was the one at fault. He had no intention of waving around his authority as King for something this trivial and intended for his benefit.

“Blegh. I’ll try.”

In the end, Takuto was reduced to pathetically hanging his head.

“Good luck, Your Majesty...”

“Big Sista and I will help!”

Maria and Caria were still firmly in the “Spoil Takuto” group, unlike Isla, so they did their best to cheer up their despondent king. Spirits lifted a bit by their kindness, Takuto pulled them both in close for a hug to show his gratitude. They bashfully and respectfully returned his hug. He was relieved to have grown significantly closer to the twins after their rocky start.

Takuto told Isla he’d start his work for the day, feeling like he was in for a load of misery having to actually experience what it truly meant to serve as King.

“Very good. Then please proceed to the office at once. Oh, but perhaps we should clean up your room first— *Hmm?*”

Just as Takuto stood to go into his office, they heard the clatter of running footsteps coming closer until a familiar face came flying into the room.

“Lady Isla! Is Lady Isla here?! Where are you?!”

“Oh my. Hello there, Miss Emle. Why do you look like you’re about to cry? You’re ruining your pretty face.”

As soon as the teary-eyed Emle spotted Isla in the Throne Room, she dashed over and flung herself into the other woman’s torso. Apparently, she didn’t notice Takuto behind Isla’s ginormous body. Fascinated by Emle’s unusual behavior, he gestured to the twins not to say anything and quietly listened to the exchange between the Queen of Bugs and the Dark Elf.

“Lady Islaaaaa! Captain Gia broke the military equipment *AGAIN*! I can’t even count how many times he’s done it now! He burns through new stuff too fast! My budget plaaan! My budget plaaan is going up in flames!!”

“It is all fine and dandy that he is enthusiastically running military drills, but this is a bit much. Don’t you worry, sweetie. Your Isla here will *properly* put the Warrior Captain in his place. Let’s see if we can’t fix the budget plans up together later.”

“Th-Thank you so much, Lady Isla! Ah, can I stay this way a little longer...?”

“Oh dear. Someone’s being a big baby.”

Hugged by Isla’s forearms, Emle blissfully closed her eyes. From the looks of it, she was overstressed. Both Gia and Elder Moltar had become pretty relaxed after being freed from the troubles of their endless march. Thinking about all the rumors he’d heard about the fun they were having, Takuto wept for the difficulties Emle must be going through, having formerly served as Warrior Adjutant.

“I wanna hug too...” Maria said enviously.

“Miss Emle hasn’t noticed His Majesty at all yet,” Caria pointed out.

“That’s because I’m always asleep at this time.”

Showing himself now would only humiliate Emle. Takuto didn’t mind seeing her like this, but the same probably didn’t go for her. With that in mind, he quietly snuck out of the Throne Room with the twins.

“.....”

Takuto became lost in thought as they walked the corridors to their next

destination. Noticing their king had slowed down, the girls circled around in front of him and skillfully walked backward as they looked at his face.

“What’s wrong, Your Majesty?”

“I was just thinking that Isla’s like a mom.”

Life in Mynoghra had changed since her arrival. Everyone living in Mynoghra had come to respect and adore Isla so much they even began calling her Queen Mother, despite her frightening looks. She scolded everyone who overindulged like Takuto and counseled all who needed advice like Emle.

As a queen, she excelled at grasping people’s hearts and managing large groups. At this point, every Dark Elf living in Mynoghra had been cared for by her in one way or another. She was likely going to head straight to Captain Gia to lecture him on the proper use of military equipment.

She’s just like everyone’s mom. She’s kind, reliable, has something to say about everything, and incredibly scary if you anger her... Takuto thought.

“She is.”

“She definitely is.”

Both girls nodded wholeheartedly, having experienced her various mothering qualities firsthand.



AFTER the conversation that clearly established the hierarchy in Mynoghra ended with Gia getting lectured, Isla and Emle were drafting the next national management plan of action. Elder Moltar normally undertook that duty, but he was currently away handling Dragontan’s Barbarian problem.

They estimated he’d be away until Phon’kaven had a stable defense, but they couldn’t determine how long that would take with the Barbarian source still unknown. Emle took over his role for the time being since he might be gone for a long time.

By all accounts, Emle should’ve been buried under an impossible amount of work, but Isla wasn’t just called a queen for show—she was unimaginably talented at tackling Domestic Affairs, reducing the load bearing down on Emle.

Still, it was a heavy responsibility for Emle to participate in the important task of managing a part of the empire. She was bound to snap under the pressure and eventually make mistakes that she wouldn't normally.

"I can't believe His Majesty was there... I'm a failure..." she moaned.

"His Majesty didn't mind," Isla comforted the girl. "Besides, you thought he was still asleep in his bedroom. So the real culprit here is His Majesty for sleeping the day away on a normal basis."

"N-No...I mean..."

Emle made the right choice going to Isla in tears after a certain incident pushed her to the brink when it wouldn't be resolved no matter how hard she tried. It was also a fact that Isla reminded her of her mother despite her looks, which was why she'd come to depend on her more than she should. The real problem was that she'd broken down in the Throne Room before the King himself, without even knowing he was there.

When she'd realized what she had done, all the blood drained from her face. But regretting it wouldn't undo it. Moreover, the fact Isla and the King thought nothing of it only expedited poor Emle's embarrassment.

"Anyway, missy! Aren't there more important matters for you to tend to? The best way to wipe out a disgrace is to replace it with even more memorable achievements."

"Y-Yes, ma'am! You're right!" Emle exclaimed, forcing herself to change mindsets. Isla gave a satisfied nod.

Isla was absolutely right. It's no use crying over spilled milk, but you can always pour yourself another glass. There were plenty of things she could do to make up for her blunder.

"In that case, I want to get straight to work. I actually wanted to get your opinion on what facility we should construct next, Lady Isla."

"Oh? The next facility, is it? The Magic Research Institute was completed recently, right?"

Construction, Production, and Research were all currently behind schedule in

Mynoghra. This was due to Takuto's decision to expand his defense forces as soon as possible by allocating the bulk of their Resources and Materials to summoning Isla. Doing this accelerated Isla's completion rather than having the process slowed by splitting Resources between various projects at once. This particular strategy brought Isla and her Larva into play at an early stage, but it definitely put the rest of their Production and Research behind schedule.

Great care had to be taken with selecting the next construction project. Mynoghra was surrounded by potentially strong enemies and a world full of unknown dangers. Isla gave her answer taking all of that into consideration.

"...Good question, dear. I want to have Living Reeds ready in case of an emergency."

Isla decided to expand their defenses. Given the high threat presented by the world around them, she'd already made up her mind to prioritize a military facility but chose Living Reeds over Training Grounds.

Living Reeds is a building unique to Mynoghra. This basic facility grants defense buffs to the city where it's built. It also has the ability to attack enemy units, making it an excellent building in terms of defense.



Living Reeds

Building

Defense +10%

Additional Damage +1

Living Reeds is a building unique to **Mynoghra** and takes the place of **Stone Walls**. In addition to its normal ability, it has the bonus effect of dealing +1 damage to enemy units when defending the town or city where it's built.

“What do you think of building a Learning Institute instead?” Emle asked. “We’ve received a great number of petitions from the people on the matter of education. I can honestly understand their desire to prepare a proper educational environment for the next generation since Dark Elves are tasked with handling Mynoghra’s intellectual matters...”

“That’s true. Mynoghra’s citizens occupy vital positions due to their limited numbers. My precious little ones can handle all matters related to manual labor, but the Dark Elves are indeed an absolute necessity for intellectual work.”

Emle proposed an emphasis on Domestic Affairs to Isla, whose emphasis was on Military Affairs. Mynoghra’s current defenses rested on Isla’s shoulders. They also had the Long-legged Bugs, whose Strength had increased with her buffs as well. And they had her Combat Larva in reserve too. As time went on, Isla’s combat abilities as a Hero would increase, and they could call back Atou if they needed to.

In reality, they actually had a strong enough defense force. Hence, Emle determined it’d be wiser to devote more Resources toward Domestic Affairs to make up for the time they lost summoning Isla. Isla also thought there was merit to her stance.

Mynoghra wasn’t currently at war with any empires. Going to extremes and blowing their budget on high-cost, low-return military assets presented a problem of its own by exceeding their empire’s ability to pay for military assets they may not yet need. Besides, their military budget would grow in proportion with their national power, giving them more capital to work with. In that case, strengthening their national foundation should be top priority, followed by military projects.



City Research +10%

City Operating Cost -10%

The Learning Institute is a building that improves a city's research capabilities by promoting academics. It's indispensable for the production of units and the construction of facilities that require advanced education, and it also has the added bonus of reducing city operating costs.

Plus, Takuto's strategy revolved around Domestic Affairs. They basically just needed a strong enough military to defend themselves.

It's during early-game, when empires are at their weakest, that a single facility can dramatically affect how things play out later.

Just because Takuto would make the final decision didn't excuse the others from thinking about these things themselves. Isla had plenty of experience managing Domestic Affairs as a game character, but she still lacked when it came to applying that knowledge to real-world decisions. Any choice she made would be passed on to Takuto—she couldn't bear disappointing him with a half-baked proposal.

"It's a tricky choice," she said.

Isla and Emle racked their brains as they watched the busy streets in the center of the city bustling with Dark Elves. They tossed several ideas back and forth, eventually concluding that domestic growth was important, but defenses took priority given the present Barbarian threat. Before they could finalize their plan, Isla spotted someone running toward them.

"Lady Isla, do you have a moment?"

It was the younger twin, Caria. The girl proudly showed off her painful-looking burn scars as if they were a badge of honor. Isla didn't understand what drove the girl to do that, given she was still at an age when looks mattered, but she treated her with kindness, figuring there was a greater story behind it.

"Why, if it isn't our darling little Caria. What brings you here, little lovebug? Where's your big sister?"

"Big Sista is looking after His Majesty. The King asked me to fetch you since he wants to discuss some things. He said it can wait until you are finished," Caria conveyed cheerfully, earning an approving nod from Isla.

For a Hero like Isla, Mynoghra's citizens were her charges to protect. She had the additional traits of a Queen, which brought out her maternal instincts despite her monstrous appearance, and she adored all the precious little larva under her authority.

How could she not love a child who perfectly ran her errands?

Isla's motherly side took over, and she scooped Caria up into a big hug with her forearms.

"Wonderful! I understand what is needed of me. You did such a good job relaying your message, lovebug! Good bugs get hugs and kisses!"

"*Uwah!* Mmph! ...Ehehe."

"Lucky..."

Emle enviously watched them, further arousing Isla's maternal instincts. Her excitement reached its zenith, and she was about to scoop Emle into a mantis hug alongside Caria, when it suddenly dawned on her to see what the Dark Elf youngling thought of their proposal.

"Oh, right! I need to hear what you think too, sweetie. You're also one of Mynoghra's precious citizens. I wonder what your take will be, little Caria."

"...*Hm?* My take on what?" Caria asked, a blank look on her face.

Isla threw Caria up in the air and caught her like a mother might a young child while she explained the gist of what she'd been discussing with Emle. She had her reasons for purposely asking the girl her opinion on political matters.

The Dark Elves were expected to play an active role in academic fields in the future, unlike Mynoghra's main race, the Homunculus. In other words, they would become the empire's future Researchers, Mages, Artists, Philosophers, and the like.

With that in mind, they needed to be groomed to think for themselves and not just be regular citizens who merely tilled the fields without ever aspiring for more. Hence, she decided to get them into the habit of tackling bigger topics from an early age. Caria and Maria needed to obtain even more wisdom than the rest because they were under the direct tutelage of the King to become future leaders.

Isla expected her to put a lot of thought into answering her question.



"I say go with the Learning Institute, then. It's a facility we have to have

eventually, anyway. We can do Living Reeds after that.”

“Your wish is my command, my master. I shall inform the builders.”

After careful scrutiny, Isla presented the proposal they’d arrived at, and Takuto passed judgment on their plan.

The final decision was to construct the Learning Institute.

Takuto accepted the plan Isla and the others had proposed. Caria’s words were the final deciding factor that clinched it. Mentioning that she and her sister wanted to study to aid the King reminded Isla of the importance of education and helped her decide which path to take.

“By the way, how are things going with our Atou, Your Majesty?” Isla asked. “She’s checking in with you every night, right?”

“Yeah, of course. It sounds like things are taking an interesting turn.”

“Meaning she’s succeeding in stealing skills from the Barbarians?”

“Yep. Way more than we could’ve hoped for.”

Takuto grinned wickedly. His delight was evident even though his face was an indecipherable miasma of darkness.

Isla was pleased that Atou was achieving better results than expected and that her strategies were well-matched with the current Barbarian situation.

Change was afoot throughout the world, that much was certain.

The sudden and random Barbarian attacks without a known cause was reason for concern. But Isla was convinced any problem would be blown away like dust under her king’s rule, hence why she raised her voice in a “gichichi” laugh alongside him.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

The Facility to be constructed has been selected.

Under Construction: <<Learning Institute>>

OK

Chapter 12: Turning Point

AROUND the time Takuto was having his lifestyle choices improved by his newly summoned Hero, Atou and the rest of the dispatched troops were devoting their all to fulfilling their own mission. But the military actions they took at Dragontan on this particular day stepped outside of defense and into the realm of hunting.

“L-Lady Atou! Word has come in from the Scouts! Five separate Goblin hordes are approaching from the southwest!” Two full-size melons jiggled with that high-pitched report.

“M’kay. I’m on it.”

In a temporary tent set up outside of Dragontan, Atou listened to the report given by the town’s mayor, Antelise. How many times had they repeated this same tired exchange? Although she was annoyed being interrupted just as she was about to drink the rare tea she’d discovered in Dragontan, Atou looked beyond the horizon outside of the tent, never expressing her inner ire.

A fraction of a second later, a giant tentacle burst out behind her and plunged into the ground. The ground rippled and groaned as the tentacle silently slipped underneath the soil before erupting from the earth to the sound of flesh and bones being ripped to shreds, and the death cries of Goblins filled the air in the distance.

“A good hunt. All right, I’m finished.”

“Eeeeeeeek! Thank you very much, Lady Atou! Really, I mean it. Thank you!”

Trembling, the mayor bowed over and over again while offering up words of gratitude, tears in her eyes. Smelling the fear on her, Atou tried to address the other woman as gently as possible, her expression twitching slightly.

“Mayor Antik.”

“Eeep! Ah! H-How may I help you, Lady Atou?! Oh, right, did I ever mention

that I'm really good friends with the Elfuur Sisters?! Er, well, not that this is something I should be talking about right now. But I just thought you would like to know how close we are!"

Sympathizing with the miserable Elf who was trying her darndest to get into Atou's good graces and secure her own life by mobilizing every connection at her disposal, Atou offered a way out for her before she permanently damaged her stomach lining under all the stress.

"I don't need anything. I just thought you looked a little tired. Why don't you take a break? My job is to stay on standby here, so you are welcome to rest as long as you send a messenger to inform me when more Barbarians show up..."

This was Atou's way of being thoughtful of Antelise, who she felt bad seeing tremble at the slightest movement, her face whiter than a ghost. She knew Antelise couldn't completely leave them because she was the mayor, but she hoped this suggestion might ease her mind.

"S-Since you were kind enough to offer, I think I might do just that. I need booz— I mean, I need a drink for my parched throat!"

"Go enjoy a good drink."

"I will! Thank you so much!"

Antelise bounded away like a startled hare.

Impressed by her speediness, Atou thought back on how the people of Dragontan behaved around her people. While everyone seemed frightened, Atou was relieved they weren't outright avoiding her. The oddly jolly mayor appeared to be maintaining her sanity by viewing this as a part of her duties, but it was incredibly difficult for other races to accept anyone belonging to the forces of evil. As a general rule, Dragontan should've had a harder time accepting Mynoghra's military anywhere near their town...

A silly misunderstanding prevented that from happening.

Funnily enough, the people of Dragontan, outside of the mayor and other top government officials, were afraid but not terrified of Atou because of this little misunderstanding. Though it goes without saying that the reason behind it didn't sit well with Atou herself...

“I presume Goblins no longer pose any benefit to you, Lady Atou?”

“Hello, Elder Moltar...”

Elder Moltar suddenly appeared beside the simple wood chair she was sitting on. Atou greeted him without looking, her bored gaze trained on the horizon as she sipped her lukewarm tea.

“I still don’t know how to view the people of Dragontan for thinking you are an octopus Demi-human...”

Indeed, this was the silly reason the Humanoids of Dragontan had comfortably accepted Atou into their midst. Aside from the Staff Holder’s direct subordinates, everyone from Dragontan’s Defense Force to the general public believed Atou was an octopus Demi-human.

Word of her being an octopus Demi-human spread like wildfire after Pepe cheerfully declared “You look like an octopus!” when he was startled by her tentacles for the first time. Atou had a hard time accepting the loathsome comparison but understood its usefulness.

“I resent it with all my heart, but...it’s better than being avoided like the plague or sending the public into a panic. Let me be clear that the day you say the same thing will be the day you are baptized in tentacles...octopus tentacles...”

“Hohoho! I wouldn’t dare!”

Elder Moltar sat down on a chair he procured seemingly from air, laughing loudly at the tentacles wriggling in front of him. Phon’kaven’s Scouts were hectically going about their business around them. Some of the subordinates Atou and Elder Moltar brought appeared to be working well with Dragontan’s Defense Force.

“By the way, what skills have you taken so far, Lady Atou?”

As Atou was absently thinking real battle made for excellent training, Elder Moltar broke her wandering thoughts with his quiet question, his hands relaxed around his staff.

“Outdoor Survival from the Goblins, Enhanced Stamina from the Orcs, and

Enhanced Strength and Regeneration from the Hill Giants. A Stone Golem was spotted the other day, so I would love to add Stone Skin to the list next.”

Their joint defense operations with Dragontan had already given them excellent results so far. These Barbarians had little Strength and could easily be dealt with by slightly stronger units. They required as little attention as any squishy regular Soldier unit, but that didn’t mean their skills weren’t useful. Rather, their skills were disproportionately stronger than the units themselves, strengthening Atou more than any of them had expected.

Elder Moltar recalled the properties of each of those skills just by hearing their titles and rejoiced to learn Atou had grown into an even mightier being with their addition.

“Voids, that’s a bigger catch than expected. Our king must be pleased.”

“Yes! You know it! King Takuto lavished me with praise! I’m going to see to it that I get so much praise when I get home that it gives me cavities!”

“A most auspicious beginning to our mission— Oh?” Elder Moltar directed his sharp gaze toward the hill in front of them, his hand stopping in the middle of stroking his long beard.

Atou lazily followed his gaze to where she spotted a small shadow suddenly appear on top of the hill.

“Another Hill Giant. *Hmm*. More are attacking than usual today.”

No matter how many times they saw the Barbarians randomly appear, they still didn’t know what was behind this strange phenomenon. They continued to rack their brains over what could be causing something so out of the ordinary to keep happening.

At first, they assumed Teleportation Magic was at play until Elder Moltar ruled it out with his thorough investigation. He couldn’t sense any spells or Magic Power activating. If the most experienced and knowledgeable man when it came to magic said it wasn’t Teleportation Magic, then it was unlikely he was wrong.

And if it wasn’t that, then they really were appearing out of thin air, but... adopting that theory ignored the laws of physics and ran contrary to logical

thought. Then again, the laws of physics didn't have as much bearing on a world of magic.

Their objective to exterminate the Barbarians to protect Dragontan and procure their skills to strengthen Atou was going well, but their investigation into the Barbarians' random appearances had all but come to a standstill. Allowing this problem to persist meant delaying Atou's long-awaited reunion with Takuto, which was unbearable for her.

"What a bother. Who knows when I'll get back to King Takuto if this keeps up..."

"L-Lady Atou! Sorry to bother you! There's a Hill Giant! The Archers are getting into position! I'm really sorry!"

Antelise tumbled into the tent, looking like she'd just seen a ghost. The faint smell of alcohol wafting from her breath suggested she'd been enjoying her break, but her withdrawn expression was dead serious. Of course, this was a serious situation. The Barbarians called Hill Giants were strong units with a base Strength of 4 and several physical enhancement skills, such as Enhanced Strength and Enhanced Stamina.

A normal army would inevitably struggle and sustain losses against one. Worse yet, one wrong move could lead to the entire army being wiped out in a single skirmish. Hill Giants were too powerful of an opponent for a rural town's Defense Force to take on.

"Yes, I know. The Archers will only get in my way, so please tell them to stand down. I will go personally."

"I can't let you do that! If I ask you to go alone, I'll be in for an earful— Hey! Please wait!"

Atou slowly rose from her chair and stood at the entrance to her tent before she exploded into a full run that left cracks in the hard soil beneath her feet. She did all of this before Antelise could even get close to her. She ran faster than the fastest horse and had already arrived within viewing distance of the Hill Giant's ugly mug.

And so began the pest extermination done in the name of battle.

“GRUOOOOH?!”

“Hi. Now die.”

Atou launched herself up to eyelevel with the Giant and slashed its face with the Paladin’s Holy Sword with a superhuman jump. The Giant threw up its hands to protect its vital spots, but the slashes released by Atou’s reinforced, slender arms easily sliced through its stone-hard skin.

“GUGYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

With one arm severed at the bone, the Hill Giant furiously swung its huge club around, blinded by its pain. Every time it slammed the ground with a loud bang, Atou dodged the flying debris like an acrobat, spinning her sword in the unique Holy Sword Arte style.

The number of Hill Giants Atou had cut down thus far had already exceeded what could be counted on one hand, not to mention the countless small and medium-sized Barbarians such as Orcs and Goblins that she’d slaughtered as well. They didn’t even make for a good training dummy anymore—there was nothing left to gain from eradicating them.

Atou came out to play around with the Holy Sword Artes she’d obtained from Qualia’s High Paladin, but the Hill Giant didn’t seem like it’d last long enough to make for good practice.

Maybe I should just put a quick end to this with my tentacles.

As Atou debated how she’d like to finish it off while agilely sidestepping its attacks, she noticed Ruin suddenly filling the air around her.

“Oh?”

“Gugyah? GruooooOOH...”

The air grew stagnant and miasma permeated the surrounding area. The ground changed color, and the rugged plants capable of growing in the wastelands rapidly wilted. The neutral-aligned Hill Giant visibly slowed down, its expression distorting with pain. Meanwhile, the evil-aligned Atou felt invigorated.

“Ah, Elder Moltar, I like the touch of flair you added there.”

Atou glanced over her shoulder to see Elder Moltar had activated a spell all the way back at their tent in front of Dragontan. He'd likely used the Military Magic spell Land of Ruin. This particular spell, which transformed terrain within a certain distance into Cursed Terrain, was extremely useful for the forces of evil.

Using this spell during battle with any empire that wasn't evil-aligned would strengthen Mynoghra's forces while weakening enemy forces. Moreover, they could also use it near their border during peacetime to expand their territory, and it was very easy-to-use magic with a low cost.

This spell was made available by the Ruin Mana supplied by Mynoghra's Palace, but they hadn't had an opportunity to use it in battle before now. Elder Moltar probably wanted to test its effectiveness during these riskless skirmishes.

Once Atou regained her motivation that had hit rock bottom, she promptly tested out her strengthened physical abilities.

"Grah? *GUGYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!*"

Atou had been dodging its attacks like she was putting on a bewitching ballet performance at a theater until she abruptly came to a stop. The Hill Giant seemed to view that as a chance to strike and swung down its massive club.

Triumph gleamed in the Giant's demented eyes as an explosive bam shook the ground.

"Hehehe. Light as a feather."

"GRAH?!"

Atou stopped the Hill Giant's powerful attack with one dainty hand. With the buffs granted by the Cursed Terrain, their strength was now as far apart as heaven and earth. Shock and despair contorted the Giant's face. It was forced to face the miserable reality that it was being played with from the start.

"...I love the look on your face. Farewell."

The Hill Giant couldn't get over the shock of its strongest attack being stopped by a tiny, little creature. Atou unleashed a complete Holy Sword Arte right in its

face. Sliced from its forehead down to its chest in one straight line, the Hill Giant slowly fell backward, eventually hitting the ground with a loud THWUMP that shook the hill.

Exhaling, Atou stared at the large, fleshy mass making up the Hill Giant's corpse. Wild animals would eat it up over the next few days, but it still wasn't a pretty sight. It was awfully close to town, so she thought it'd be best to bury it. The cleanup job that came after every Barbarian encounter tended to be more backbreaking work than actually felling the creatures.

As Atou was thinking about that, the corpse suddenly started to vanish. Eyes widening with shock, Atou hopped back several feet.

"...What the? It...*vanished*?"

The corpse continued to fade until it entirely disappeared like a magician's assistant. Atou had never seen that happen before. Alarmed there was a new threat, Atou brought forth all her tentacles and kept her eyes peeled.

But...nothing happened.

Actually, she spotted something small and shiny reflecting the sunlight right beneath where the Hill Giant's corpse had been. Atou moved her tentacle to cautiously pick the object up.

"...A gold coin?"

It was a gold coin unlike any she had ever seen before.



"**HILL** Giants can no longer even put up a struggle against you... Nay, they never so much as posed a threat to you from day one, Lady Atou."

Elder Moltar merrily welcomed Atou back from battle. Not only was he thrilled to see the Hero he admired growing visibly stronger before his very eyes, but he was also pleased his spell worked in real combat.

"I wouldn't be able to call myself a Hero if I struggled against creatures of their level. This is also proof that I've been doing a good job plundering their skills, too... How are things going on your end, Elder Moltar?"

Atou waved away his flattery as she sat back on her chair and asked about the

real mission he'd been sent to accomplish. Takuto had tasked him with investigating and further developing the Dragon Vein Mine. One look at the elderly sage suggested he wasn't having any trouble getting his work done.

"Fortunately, research has also been going smoothly on my end. I must say, I was surprised such a mystical land truly exists. I feel like a boy in a candy shop."

At first glance, the Dragon Vein Mine looked almost bowl-shaped, not dissimilar from a mortar for grinding herbs. Crystals of solidified Magic Power formed from years of dense Mana erupting from its center covered the area, climbing the walls and spreading outward. Dragontan's mine had been filled and then blanketed with dirt from nearby in order to conceal it, but due to its sheer size, it couldn't be completely concealed.

Not to mention the un-mined Mana crystals continued to expand and creep out across the land, all but ignoring any attempts to conceal it. Anyone with knowledge of raw Mana could easily recognize its characteristics at a glance. Even mundane peasants were beginning to notice the effects on the nearby land as the incident with the drug dealers had proven.

Atou was enraptured by the magical sight when she saw it with her own eyes. It was no wonder Elder Moltar was electrified by it. Of course, its actual value was by no means confined to its value as a visual marvel.

"Hehehe, that is most fortunate. Large-scale Terrain Enhancements will become possible once we can use the pure Mana from the Dragon Vein Mine, too. Mynoghra will develop even further once we can use the magic that allows you to instantly transform even a barren Wasteland into a fertile one."

"All of the spells that can be used thanks to Military Magic have such terrifyingly amazing effects. I must admit, I'm eagerly looking forward to the day when we can use magic specialized in Terrain Enhancements."

Elder Moltar and Atou gushed about what the future held. It wouldn't be wrong to say that Mynoghra had obtained an incredibly powerful card. Sure, it was still under development, but they looked forward to the day when it bore fruit and brought immeasurable prosperity to Mynoghra.

"I bet it will knock the robe right off of you. The visual effects are ridiculously elaborate— Oops, I forgot I wanted to ask you about something, Elder Moltar."

“Oh? What might that be?”

Noticing the nearby Phon’kaven guards had walked away during their conversation, Atou decided to see if Elder Moltar could shed any light on the strange phenomenon she had witnessed earlier. It was a difficult phenomenon to wrap her head around, but that was no reason to ignore it or share it with everyone at this stage.

Only fools leave concerns to fester. She needed to report back to Takuto about it too, but it shouldn’t hurt for her to do a little investigating on her end first. Thus, she chose Elder Moltar as her soundboard.

“Do you recognize this?” she asked.



Atou handed him the gold coin she got from the Hill Giant.

“*Hrm...* Let me take a look. Looks like some sort of coinage...and a gold coin at that. Where did you get this?”

“It dropped from the Hill Giant.”

“Huh? *Draaped*? Hmm? The Hill Giant had this on it?”

“Yes. Is it from any of the nations you know of?”

Items didn’t normally drop from enemies in this world. Anything a defeated enemy had on their person would inevitably be up for grabs after they were defeated, but it was implausible for their corpse to vanish and leave something behind.

While *Eternal Nations* did have an item drop system, it only applied to legendary equipment and items that would drastically influence an entire game session. This coin didn’t seem to fit that description.

Atou observed Elder Moltar as he closely examined the coin. By the looks of it, he didn’t have a good feeling about it either.

“*Hmmm*. Nay, I’ve neither seen nor heard of anything like it,” he eventually said after a long pause. “Moreover, the technology used to manufacture such a coin...leads me to believe it isn’t from this continent. If you don’t mind, I will run it by Dragontan’s scholars, but I believe they will give the same answer.”

“Really? Then that means it came from somewhere else... That’s more than a little troubling given the fact that the Hill Giant’s...corpse suddenly vanished. That never happened before.”

“Barbarians who appear out of thin air, coinage from beyond the continent, and vanishing corpses...this is more than a little disturbing.”

Atou tightened her jaw, her brows furrowing.

At first, she thought the Hill Giant had obtained the coin from some poor soul, but that didn’t appear to be the case, which meant she could no longer be optimistic about the situation. She was starting to see the hidden thread. If some unknown entity was behind everything, then their empire needed to be put on high alert.

Then there was the Hill Giant corpse that had disappeared.

They appear out of thin air and vanish into thin air when defeated, leaving only money in their wake.

It suddenly dawned on Atou what that sounded an awful lot like.

“Indeed. It’s almost like what happens in an RP—”

Shock flashed across her face.

“Lady Atou?”

“No way. It can’t be possible...”

Atou rose from her chair and hastily held her hand to her ear, and closed her eyes. Just as Elder Moltar realized that was the gesture she made whenever she was getting in touch with King Takuto, a panicked Dragontan Scout tumbled into the tent.

“It’s an emergency! A massive Barbarian horde has appeared! Wh-What the Spirits is going on?! There isn’t a patch of land without them!”

Elder Moltar sprinted outside the tent with a nimbleness that belied his age and set his sights beyond the horizon.

“Voids... Eternal darkness have mercy!”

Even his slightly diminished eyesight could clearly make out the massive horde blanketing the field.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

Sludge Atou gained the following abilities by defeating units:

《Outdoor Survival》

- Does not receive any movement penalties while on the field

《Enhanced Stamina》

- Unit Movement +50%

《Enhanced Strength》

- Unit Strength +10%

《Regeneration》

- Unit Recovers 5% of HP every turn
- Unit Recovers 10% of HP while in rest mode

OK



Dark Mage (Elder Moltar)

Magic Unit

Strength: 3 Move: 1

<Sage>

<Dark Magic Lv.1>

<Ruin Magic Lv.2>



Description

~~A skilled Knight does the work of a hundred Warriors, while a skilled Mage does the work of a hundred Knights. ~~

Land of Ruin is Lv.1 Ruin Magic that can be used after researching Military Magic. This spell instantly transforms the target terrain into Cursed Terrain that buffs evil-aligned units. The change is temporary and will disappear after a set amount of turns. It's used for various purposes, such as buffing units during combat and destroying production within enemy empires.

Chapter 13: The Quickening

AT Mynoghra's Palace, the lazy king was being cared for by the twin girls atop his throne. It was a common sight seen on a typical day. Although they couldn't completely let down their guard, time was peacefully passing by...until everything changed...

"What's going on?" Takuto muttered in a panic, suddenly jumping up from his throne.

The two girls waiting on him gave their king curious looks since he was acting out of the ordinary.

"What's the matter, Your Majesty?"

"Did something happen?"

"Be quiet for a minute."

Startled by his sharp reply, the girls trembled and hung their heads, not daring to utter another word. What had happened? The girls felt uneasy because Takuto's sudden shift in demeanor meant something had gone horribly wrong.

They wanted to know what was wrong this instant. But the twins were clever enough not to interrupt their king's brooding with pointless questions. He'd answer them when he could.

Besides, Takuto couldn't afford to waste time coddling them right now. He'd normally be much gentler with them, but what he'd just learned didn't allow him to be considerate of others.

He had just received reports of a massive Barbarian horde suddenly appearing to the south of Dragontan.

It's physically impossible for them to have just appeared there. Did some sort of event trigger?

The first report came from the single Long-legged Bug he had stationed

around Dragontan just in case. He initially did that to discover any threats to Dragontan and investigate what was causing the sudden Barbarian appearances... Now it seemed that he'd either succeeded in his investigation or stumbled upon a truth he would've rather not known about.

At any rate, the sight he'd seen through his shared vision with the Long-legged Bug made his blood run cold.

First, I need to have the Long-legged Bug get a detailed grasp of the enemy's strength and order it to destroy them if it can... No, wait. Do I need to confirm if they're the enemy first? No, it'll be too late if I don't act first.

Originally meant to be a Scout unit, the Long-legged Bug excelled at exploration and investigation. It could efficiently grasp the enemy's strength and numbers with its excellent long-distance vision. Plus, as a Bug unit, it was getting a Strength buff from Isla's passive skills.

Even if the Hill Giants were out of its league, it should be able to effortlessly mow down Goblins and Orcs. Long-legged Bugs weren't cheap, but they could be replaced. There was no doubt in Takuto's mind that it was better to go on the offensive here.

How many are there? Holy crap. There are ten whole fricken' doomstacks!!

Doomstacks are armies that ignore immersion and cohesiveness, favoring raw power instead. It was essentially ten armies coming together in a giant horde. Put into general numbers, the enemy's army was greater than ten thousand strong. That was a hopeless number, but Takuto didn't have the time to complain.

He was used to responding to sudden crises. Besides that, he had cut his way out of worse pinches than this in *Eternal Nations*.

Confirming that his fate wasn't yet set in stone, Takuto calmly gave orders while receiving information from the Long-legged Bug stationed closest to the armies. He needed to whittle down the enemy's numbers as much as he could before they took action. He didn't know what was going on yet, but he understood he was suddenly thrust into a do-or-die situation.

Still standing, Takuto swiftly headed for the Palace exit. Sensing the two small

girls trailing behind him, he briefly asked “Where’s Isla?” while continuing to work out a strategy.

As Mynoghra’s King, Takuto could detect the status and location of all his units. Naturally, he could locate Isla and telepathically send her orders, but he deliberately put the question to the girls. He felt bad for treating them curtly, and conversing with them also helped remind him of the gravity of the things he had to protect.

“Mother Isla is in town.”

“Mama—Lady Isla is inspecting the buildings in town. Should I go get her, Your Majesty?”

“Pleas— No, you don’t have to.”

Takuto changed his instructions after hearing a high-pitched buzzing in his ears. Apparently, Isla had also confirmed the sudden upheaval. The buzzing rapidly grew as loud as a roaring sports car engine, making him want to cover both ears. Just as he set foot outside the Palace, Isla landed in front of him with a heavy thud.

“Your orders, my master.”

With that single comment, Takuto remembered Isla had access to all the information coming through her bugs. That made things easier. They were in a fight against time.

Mishandling the massive Barbarian horde could be fatal to Mynoghra. Especially when it came to Dragontan. They couldn’t lose the Dragon Vein Mine they’d finally obtained.

Takuto was also worried about Atou. She was currently tasked with defending Dragontan. He believed she could handle any number of Barbarians with her current abilities, but the situation was still dire. There was no telling what could go wrong.

He had a mountain of things to consider and do. In the game, time didn’t advance until he finished his turn, giving him ample time to think and plan. But reality wasn’t so kind.

In a race against time, pausing too long to think was beyond foolish.

However, Takuto wasn't alone in this world. Reliable subordinates were working with all their might to support him. And he had someone who he trusted with his whole being.

Did his worries reach her?

Just as Takuto's thoughts went to his confidant, she reached out to him telepathically.

"King Takuto, I'm sure you are already aware of this, but a massive Barbarian Horde is closing in on us from the south!"

"I just confirmed it myself. Things have taken a ridiculous turn, haven't they? How are things on your end?"

Isla cocked her head, wordlessly asking, "Are you talking to Atou?"

Takuto nodded in response while simultaneously processing multiple tasks in his head.

A slow initial response would dramatically affect the outcome. He didn't have time to be pulled in a million directions. His first course of action was to gather as much information as quickly as possible.

I'll be fine. I'm more than capable of resolving a crisis of this level.

Takuto had an accurate grasp of his abilities and made an objective judgment call based on that. Viewed another way, the Barbarian invasion also meant he could strengthen his Heroes. A siege battle was the perfect event to pump Atou and Isla full of experience by way of Barbarian deaths, and after defeating the horde, they could investigate the root source at their leisure.

His strategy started to go in that direction, but things are never that easy...

"I have something more urgent to report to you first. Before this horde appeared, I defeated a Hill Giant, and not only did its corpse vanish into thin air, but it also dropped a gold coin. I've confirmed it's a currency that doesn't belong to this world."

"...Shit!" Takuto swore out loud.

He had completely overlooked that possibly. No, he had actually considered the possibility but pushed it to the back of his thoughts.

If he and Atou had come to this world as game characters, then it wasn't illogical for there to be others like them.

Takuto ground his teeth, vexed by the crisis his lack of forethought had invited.

What an oversight! Why didn't I realize it sooner?! It did cross my mind, but I think I thought it sounded too ridiculous to be true... Dammit all!

Takuto felt like all the pieces were rapidly coming together.

Word had it that Qualia had their hands full with a sudden enemy from the north.

What if that disturbance had something to do with another civilization like Mynoghra getting summoned? What if the Saint's oracle that sent Qualia's Paladins to the Accursed Lands was actually a sign of an emerging civilization? And what if now a new threat had emerged south of Dragontan?

Takuto had been reborn into this world alongside Atou, and they were trying to establish a new empire together. As long as he was living proof it could happen, he couldn't assume the same thing wouldn't apply to the other empires.

Are they from Eternal Nations? If they are, then the Guo-Guo-Gwago Tribe or KAN'D (The Committee for the Advancement of Natural Disasters) would be the most likely candidates.

Takuto went over the list of likely civilizations from the game.

Barbarians—including everything from Goblins to Orcs and Hill Giants—existed within *Eternal Nations* as well. Plenty of civilizations could produce them as units or win them over to their side through various means built into the game.

The threat would be immeasurable if one of those civilizations ended up transferring as-is to this world too. Both were evil civilizations with zero interest in cooperating with other empires.

No, it seems unlikely for them to be a civilization from Eternal Nations.

Takuto made that snap decision. He didn't have in-depth details on them yet, but what he'd heard from Atou sounded too different from Mynoghra, which would suggest they were here under different mechanics from Takuto at least.

Analyzing the information they'd gathered thus far told them that the Barbarian attacks had increased at a gradual rate. In the beginning, the Barbarian corpses remained after they were defeated, but now they vanished, leaving a gold coin in their wake.

Were the frequent Barbarian raids their way of testing how strong the enemy forces are? Or should I view the disappearance of the corpses as evidence they were summoned? Is that why the Barbarian numbers suddenly increased?

A massive Barbarian horde suddenly appeared as if on cue, plummeting an empire into crisis and forcing its towns to go on the defensive. It was almost as if this was the start of some story...

The number I confirmed with Long-legged Bug's shared vision is highly abnormal. Not a number a civilization could prepare right after being dropped into this world. Then again, there hadn't even been any signs of another game civilization existing here until now.

The empire had to be of considerable size to prepare an army of this size. If so, it should be nigh impossible to completely conceal its existence.

The Long-legged Bugs had already scouted the Uncharted Territory south of Dragontan to some extent. If there was even the slightest trace of a civilization in that endless expanse of barren terrain, they wouldn't have missed it. At this stage, Takuto was half-sure that his opponent was a hostile army from another world.

"Atou, do you still have that coin? Show it to me."

"At once."

Takuto instantly gained access to Atou's sense of sight. He paid careful attention to every detail vividly projected into his mind. He couldn't miss a thing. If he couldn't gather enough information, it was very possible Mynoghra would be destroyed.

Feeling panic starting to roil in the pit of his stomach but still holding onto the calm he'd built up like a steel wall, Takuto dug through his mind's archives to try and place the coin.

"I've never seen this coin before," Atou said telepathically. "It doesn't appear to be from Eternal Nations...but it seems to have been made by a fairly advanced civilization. Do you recognize it, King Takuto?"

This design... I've seen this pattern before!

The coin's design consisted of a round sun with a letter inscribed in its center.

Takuto furrowed his brow. The design tugged on an old memory.

The events of his past flowed through his mind like a projector playing at high speed. It flipped back through his memories from a few days ago to a few weeks ago... Time rewound until it arrived at the memories of what had happened before he came to this world—of when he was bedridden in a hospital on Earth. The various conversations he had with doctors in the hospital room, the news he watched on TV, the books he read to pass the time, and eventually, his memories turned to the various computer and video games he used to play ...

"Right, this crest is from..." he muttered as he struck upon what he recognized the gold coin from.

Things had come together almost a little too perfectly that Takuto couldn't shake the feeling it was all a part of some game event. And when he realized that feeling wasn't all that far from the truth, his face twitched.

Something had begun. At this very moment, a grand story was beginning to unfold. And that was the worst possible thing that could happen.

This is bad...very bad... My opponent's strength is a complete unknown.

Takuto clenched his teeth. He was frustrated that his oversight had catapulted him and Atou into a dangerous situation. But he had enough mental fortitude not to throw a child's tantrum over such a thing.

Takuto gave Atou some simple instructions and temporarily ended their conversation. He told her to report back on every detail over their open

telepathic link and ordered her to focus on defending Dragontan.

First things first, he needed to hammer out a basic plan of action with Isla. When Takuto returned from the sea of thought and looked up, the twins were gone. He realized Isla had thoughtfully sent them to fetch Emle and Gia and gratefully turned his attention to her.

“Isla, this is bad.”

“What’s bad, my master?”

Nervous tension ran through Isla’s normally calm, motherly voice that belied her looks. She had detected the gravity of the situation from Takuto’s unusual behavior. But just how much of the situation had she guessed for herself?

“We’ve got an enemy empire—one just like us.”

“Like us? Meaning they come from *Eternal Nations*? Is it possible to open up a dialogue with them? If we can negotiate, then it would be best to end things with them as peacefully as possible...”

“Fat chance. I doubt we can even talk to them. They don’t work that way. They function under a different set of rules than the world we came from...”

Isla gasped. After repeatedly analyzing her master’s shocking revelation, she came to understand that Takuto had established a theory about the true nature of the crisis bearing down on them.

“You know who they are, don’t you?”

Takuto nodded. Remembering the pattern on the gold coin Atou showed him, he answered, “It’s just a guess, but I would say in all probability our enemy is from...a ***role playing game***.”

The same logo as the title of the RPG he’d once played was inscribed on the gold coin.

Forces that could have normally never crossed paths were about to meet in an unknown world...

Volume 2: End

SYSTEM MESSAGE

A new force has been summoned into the world.

《Brave Questers' Demon Lord Army》

<!--Error Number 447 (Abnormal Operation was Performed)

<!-- The summoning of Heroes by automatic response has been suspended.

World protocol is not supported.

OK

Interlude: The Slurping Witch

AN endless expanse of white snow stretched out in every direction. Ground zero for Qualia's Northern Witch Disturbance.

Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials silently stood with her eyes trained forward, as if she were waiting for something in this former prosperous mining town where not a single living soul was left. It was a ghost town. All of the buildings that had once been bastions of human activity had turned to rubble, and the deep piles of endlessly falling snow indicated that the breath of life had been extinguished.

Soalina solemnly gazed at the town where human life had ceased to be, the memory from her last pilgrimage there filling in the scenery that once was, along with the steadfast townspeople she'd seen desperately trying to eke out a living in this harsh land...

"....."

The silence was abruptly broken.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock. Clip-clop, clip-clop."

The bell-like singing voice of a delicate young girl rang out through the frigid landscape. An impossibility; children didn't belong in this place where all life had been lost.

Hearing that singing, Soalina scrunched up her beautiful face and tightened her hand around her Holy Staff.

"God doesn't roll the dice ♪ There are no hopes or dreams ♪"

Soalina had never heard those lyrics before. Malice oozed from the singer's words despite the lyrical tone. She dug through her memory for the potential origins of the song, but it didn't bear any semblance to the songs she knew of.

"Life is just for killing time ♪ A board game made by God ♪ Die, die, die, let's all have fun and die!"

As the singing grew louder, someone came into view at the other end of the street. The singer frolicked closer to Soalina as if she were going on a picnic on a lovely, sunny afternoon. When the untitled song ended, a lone girl took center stage in the snowy world devoid of life.

“Hiya, hiya, Sainty. Good to meet you, good to see you. How ya been?”

Saint Soalina quietly stared at the girl opposite her: Erakino, the Slurping Witch.

This girl was the apocalypse-bringer that plunged the northern province of Qualia into hell and claimed the lives of many people and Paladins. Her appearance could be summed up in a single word: quirky.

Adorned in an outfit unlike anything worn by the various tribes and races Soalina knew of, the girl’s face was painted in garish makeup like a pierrot’s in a wandering troupe of performers. Despite the strangeness of her outward appearance, Soalina was convinced the entity before her was an aspect of calamity itself. The child hid her cruelty under a thin veneer of “innocence,” not unlike the fantastical paints covering her face.

An unpleasant silence settled over them, and a nasty pair of eyes unreservedly sized Soalina up with an amused sneer. Soalina’s expression didn’t so much as twitch despite being exposed to the kind of eldritch gaze that would incite fear and panic in a normal person.

“Two months have passed since the last Divine Execution.”

Soalina’s quiet utterance disregarded Erakino’s greeting and came without context. It seemed less like she was speaking to Erakino and more like she was confirming the facts with herself. Erakino cackled without a care in the world despite being ignored. Soalina merely stared at Erakino, unbothered by her high-pitched laughter shattering the world of silent desolation around them.

“*Kyahaha!* It’s been two months, eh? That much time has gone by already? Wowee, does the time fly! I’m surprised too. Time is money, procrastination brings loss. I wonder if I’ve been wasteful?”

The way she spread her arms out wide in an exaggerated gesture of surprise seemed a lot like a pierrot’s opening act, especially with how the countless bells

sewn to her clothing tinkled with abandon, adding emphasis to how she felt.

“Slurping Witch Erakino, as far as the records show, you have been divinely executed seventeen times. Each execution was successful, although accompanied by great sacrifices...”

Divine punishment carried out in the God of Qualia’s name was called a Divine Execution. Since it was done in God’s name, it was the ultimate punishment that didn’t allow for any mistakes. Confirming that each execution was successful meant confirming the absolute destruction and death of the executed.

Erakino had undergone execution *seventeen* times.

No mistakes ever occurred when doling out punishment in God’s name, and it was the way of the world that any living creature died when killed. Soalina had meted out several of those Divine Executions with her own hands and confirmed the termination of her opponent each time. Hence, this situation was a bizarre one and proof that the entity in front of her had deviated from the laws of nature established by God.

“Wahahahaha! S-Seventeen times! I can’t believe it’s been seventeen times! I die a little too much, *LOL!*”

Saint Soalina observed every move taken by the Witch, who was bent over with deranged laughter while shouting letters that made no sense. There was no question that the Witch before her was the same girl Soalina had slain many times before.

This wasn’t some cheap trick involving different people assuming her appearance, a sibling stepping into the role, or a magic duplicate. The greatest proof of this was Soalina’s extraordinary senses vividly informing her that the entity before her was indeed the one and same Witch who’d been killed two months ago.

The same Witch they had killed the time before that and the time before that... Witch Erakino had existed and died all seventeen times. She kept coming back no matter how many times they felled her. That was the nightmare known as Slurping Witch Erakino.

“Erakino...why don’t you die?” Saint Soalina frankly asked her opponent about the question that plagued her.

She naturally didn’t expect a decent response in return. The girl was likely to string a bunch of incomprehensible words together in that mentally unstable way of hers, as she usually did.

But Soalina had hope for something more to happen this time. They usually always went straight to fighting, but the Witch seemed much more talkative than usual. Due to the nature of their unique skills, the battle always leaned heavily in Soalina’s favor. So it seemed like Erakino was searching for a gap in her defenses that could lead to her victory, rather than foolishly rushing into a losing battle.

Soalina also preferred to gather as much information as possible to help her find a way to truly destroy this spawn of calamity rather than repeating the same old dull fight.

“Nah, Sainty. I die. A lot. You killed me seventeen times, right? Then I’ve died a whole seventeen times. Wowie, poor me.”

“Then how are you here...?”

“I’m...Freddy lite. But I guess you wouldn’t know that story! I mean, it’s totally old school! *Kyahaha!*”

What was so funny? Did she finally lose her marbles? Erakino roared with laughter as she held onto her stomach, tears in her eyes. She was obviously convulsing with laughter about something only she understood, but Soalina couldn’t even begin to fathom why, nor who or what this Freddy was.

And then her wild laughter stopped as suddenly as it had started. The girl with no logical reasoning behind her emotional ups and downs pursed her lips at Soalina.

“Hold up, aren’t ya a little too strong there, Sainty? I know I don’t look it, but I’m totally going for the strong girl thing here. So I’m hella unhappy that I’m practically decimated every single time I go at it with you. Is this, like, some kinda death event? Where’s a guide when you need one? Why do I have to go to fourteen every time? What’s the trick?”

Soalina didn't understand a word she said, but she could guess the gist behind what she was trying to get at.

"Saints are the guardians of the innocent and the agents of divine punishment. There is no mercy left for an evil being like you, and lenience isn't allowed when it comes to fulfilling our responsibilities."

"The last Sainty had a doggie. How's she doin'?"

The Veiled Saint was defeated by Erakino when she was about to perform the eleventh Divine Execution. Soalina had only heard vague details about what had happened. Someone was clearly withholding information. The Northern Assembly was divided on where the responsibility for it lay, but people worthlessly trying to push the blame onto someone else was the last thing Qualia needed right now. Hence, Soalina was dispatched to clean up the mess and was somehow managing to hold off the invasion.

Two towns were destroyed between the time the Veiled Saint was defeated and Soalina was asked to confront this great evil. It was foolish to try and count the number of lives lost. Seeking repentance from those she'd failed to save, Soalina shifted into a fighting stance with her Holy Staff. After all, her extrasensory perception as a Saint told her the conversation was over.

"You are trying to do something, Erakino. I still do not know what it is, but I see now that that power is your true identity."

"Ah..." Erakino uttered with a blank look of surprise. "...This is why I just hate goody-two-shoes," she sneered.

The innocent veneer slipped off, leaving a ghastly cruel smile that hinted at a hatred of all that lived.

The battle was about to begin.

"Well, shucks, you got me! Where are all my lovely Erakino supporters? It's time to roll out the clowns. The main event is about to begin, it's your time to shine!"

Several shadows appeared from behind the rubble in response to her call. Soalina wondered why she hadn't sensed them until now, but then she frowned when she noticed they were the former inhabitants of this town.

The people's skulls were cracked open like a coconut, and there was a hollow cavity where their brains should've been, as if they had been sucked out by something. Nevertheless, their dully-lit eyes honed in on Soalina with the hostile intent to kill her.

"You savage..."

"You can mock me all you like, but...I won't let you mock my people!"

The people with their brains slurped out sluggishly began to move on cue with her words. They hobbled in Soalina's precise direction while mumbling what sounded as incoherent as baby babbling. As they staggered out from the shadows, their numbers grew from a couple to a few hundred. Seeing those pitiful souls surrounding her, Soalina's heart went out to all the lives that had been lost before she promptly set aside her emotions.

"Okay, babies, chaaaarge! You'll never be yourself again after having your brains slurped anyway, so give her hell!" Erakino encouraged them in a chipper voice that didn't fit the disturbing scene and snapped a whip she'd pulled out of only God knows where.

She snapped her whip at the same time Soalina was quietly whispering her prayers to God with her Holy Staff raised.

"Ye once innocent people, our Holy God Arlos forgives your sins for turning against His Saint and commands your souls be saved. Rest in peace. I entomb ye now in a blooming burial."

"...Hot damn."

The brain-slurped townspeople rushing in to kill Soalina were instantly reduced to ash by hellfire. Flames engulfed the snowy landscape, the deep piles of snow boiled away with the pitiful lost souls, and the explosive steam created a strong gust of wind.

The sudden windstorm caused Erakino to stumble, but she quickly regained her balance. And not a second too quick because Soalina's powerful legs had brought her face to face with the Witch.

"Whoa, whoa! Down girl! Time out! Uncle! Uncle! *Fine*, take thiiiiissss!"

Erakino swung her whip around and tried to do something with her strange abilities, but Soalina's Holy Staff plunged through her stomach before she could finish whatever it was. The Saint's overly enhanced strength easily scattered the Witch's entrails, splattering lukewarm blood all over Soalina's cheeks.

"*Oomph!* ...Ah? Huh. Erakino is a goner with that hit. This is totally...a crapshoot...game... When do I get my new game pluss...?"

The Witch's body crumpled on the ground, creating a pool of bright-red blood around her.

"The eighteenth death... This should buy us some time."

Yet again, Soalina was unable to expose Erakino's true ability. It was safe to say they were at a stalemate. At the very least, as long as she was able to keep Erakino at bay, the other towns wouldn't experience any casualties at her hand. But she didn't think it was wise to remain in this same place focused only on dealing with Erakino without working toward another solution.

The Saint, who was touted for being the harbinger of justice and peace, grit her teeth in secret as the prospects for a solution were slimmer than she'd hoped.

"We still don't know anything about the potential apocalypse-bringer in the Accursed Lands. There has been absolutely no news from the Paladins who went to investigate... How many lives will be sacrificed in that land if it's yet another Witch?"

Soalina gently rubbed her cold cheek. She scowled when she felt something sticky there, and it wasn't until she brought her hand in front of her eyes that she realized it was Erakino's blood.

Even the incarnation of calamity sheds red blood? Soalina heaved a tired sigh with that odd realization.

The nineteenth Erakino was bound to show up again soon. Soalina was still capable of subduing Witch Erakino, but the girl was definitely growing stronger with each defeat. If nothing was done about it, the difference in strength between them would be reversed, and the day would come when Soalina would fall before her foreign power.

That's what the cunning Witch was going for. There weren't many Saints with more effective means of dealing with Erakino than Soalina and her large-scale Divine Execution techniques.

Soalina had to uncover the secrets behind Erakino's resurrection and kill her before that day came. Otherwise, Erakino would lay her wicked fingers on the Holy Capital, and she wouldn't stop until she killed all the people of Qualia. And she would do it like a cruelly innocent child playing with their favorite toy until they broke it, exposing sinless lambs to her unfettered malice all the while. That and that alone was the one thing that must never be allowed.

Soalina became a Saint to stop such things.

"But I need to save them all."

Flowers bloomed amid the burned terrain as if to send off the dead. A determination driven by regret filled the whisper that disappeared among the flowers blooming in the frigid land.

Only Erakino, who clung faintly to what little life she had left in her, cracked a heartless, unseen smile upon hearing her words.

Afterword

AUTHOR Fehu Kazuno here.

Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra Volume 2 safely saw the light of day! Thank you all for continuing this series from Volume 1!

Now, I'm sure everyone who reads the web novel version already knows this, but I've added a significant amount of new content to the official book release. I feel like I was able to further power up the parts that were lacking exploration in the web version and delve deeper into the characters and setting while also adding new characters and episodes. The story is steadily showing where it's going next, and it has me excited to write it!

I hope you will continue to enjoy the series.

I have limited room to write the afterword this time, so I would like to use this space to quickly advertise some exciting news...

Mynoghra is getting a manga adaptation in Japan! The charm of the manga version drawn by Yasaiko Midorihana lies in Sensei's ability to switch between the comical and the serious. One second you are enjoying an adorable scene that makes you giggle, followed by a serious scene that has you on the edge of your seat because it's so cool and serious!

Please check it out, as it does a fantastic job drawing out the best points of the story, to the point I can't believe I was the original creator of the storyline! It's currently being serialized on *NicoNico Seiga* and *ComicWalker* in Japanese. *The highlight of the manga adaptation is how adorable and cool Atou-chan comes across. I strongly recommend it!*

Next, I would like to thank the people who I'm much obliged to.

Illustrator Jun, thank you so much for continuing to illustrate the light novel version. I'm extremely grateful to you for responding perfectly to my detailed and difficult-to-understand requests. There were a lot more girls introduced in this volume, and it was a real pleasure to see their illustrations.

Mangaka Yasaiko Midorihana, thank you so much for drawing such a wonderful manga adaptation. It's been extremely well-received by readers, reinforcing the initial impression and confidence I had in it when I first laid eyes on your storyboard.

Tooru Shiwasu, thank you so much for happily accepting our request to contribute to the paper wrapper despite your busy schedule. I couldn't stop myself from being in awe of your masterful commentary that perfectly captures the essence of my story.

Thank you everyone who has continued to work on this series since Volume 1, including the design company, the proofreaders, my editor, and the entire editing department at GC Novels. It is with all of your assistance that this book made it into the world. I'm beyond grateful for all the help I've received. I think I could write a whole book solely about the gratitude I feel...I mean it.

And to the many others who have assisted in various ways, it's with everyone's help that this work has seen the light of day. I really appreciate you!

Last but not least, I want to express my great joy that you, the reader, have picked up the second volume. Were you satisfied with it?

I hope I can greet you again like this in the next volume. Until next time.

2巻発売、
CONGRATULATIONS
ON VOLUME 2!
おめでとうございませう！



SLG VS RPG



SLG VS RPG
Different games are
about to clash in another
world!

**COMING SPRING
2022!**

APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA
-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

03



AS THE VILLAINESS, I REJECT THESE HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

A romantic comedy oneshot about a villainess doing whatever it takes to stop the heroine from falling in love and dooming the world!

REINCARNATED AS THE LAST OF MY KIND

STORY BY: KIRI KOMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YAMIGO
SERIES | VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



RESET! THE IMPRISONED PRINCESS DREAMS OF ANOTHER CHANCE!

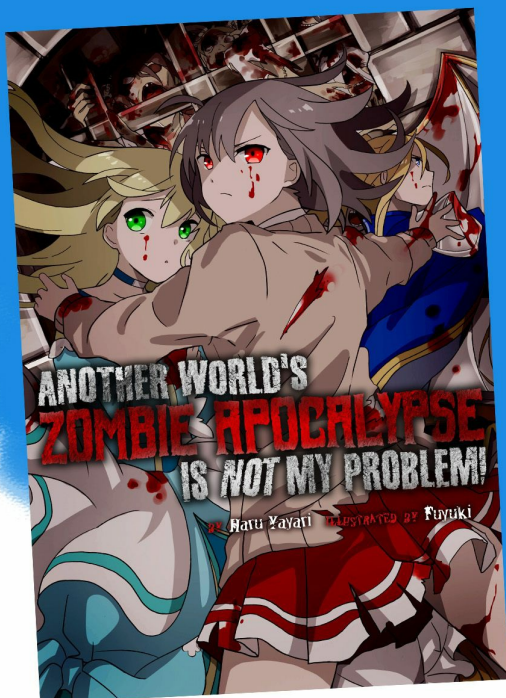
STORY BY: KEI MISAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: POPORUCHA
SERIES | VOL 1 OUT NOW

Can Magic Change Her Future?

This is the story of Princess Annabel's second chance at life, and her drive to stop the destruction of her kingdom.



cross infinite world



ANOTHER WORLD'S ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE IS NOT MY PROBLEM!

STORY BY: HARU YAYARI
ILLUSTRATION BY: FUYUKI
VOL. 1 & 2 | OUT NOW

Just when I thought navigating high school was bad enough, I woke up to a rotting, post-apocalyptic world!

SINCE I WAS ABANDONED
AFTER REINCARNATING, I WILL
COOK WITH MY FLUFFY FRIENDS

STORY BY: YU SAKURAI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KASUMI NAGI
SERIES | VOL 1 OUT NOW

After being dumped by her fiancé and expelled from the kingdom, Laetitia decides to live her life in leisure, cooking for cute and fluffy mythical creatures!



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!

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